

Workers Struggles: The Americas

7 March 2017

Mexican university professors' strike over medical and pension issues in third week

A strike at the Antonio Narro Autonomous Agrarian University (UAAAN) by members of the UAAAN Academic Workers Syndicate (SUTAUAAAN), which began February 16, entered its third week March 2 with no end in sight. The educators voted to walk out after one of several meetings with the UAAAN rectory failed to resolve issues regarding funding for medical services and pensions.

SUTAUAAAN secretary general Roxana Cuevas Flores told reporters on that day that, despite months of negotiations, "They have made a lot of promises, but an astonishing budget deficit exists in the pension fund and in practically all the branches of social security; the money remains to attend to the issue of retirement and pensions for workers for two years. Therefore nobody can retire, because ... the funds are reduced, and nobody would have enough."

The union has petitioned the Treasury Secretariat, the Chamber of Deputies and the state government, in addition to the UAAAN rectory, to no avail. Last year they met with Section 38 of the SNTE national teachers federation and the state government, who promised to make an actuarial study of the Pension and Medical Service Institute, to be released in July 2016. To date the results are not known.

As of March 3, the rectory and government agencies had still not responded to the crisis.

Salvadoran microbus drivers strike to protest gang extortion

Microbus drivers for route 11-C, which carries passengers to and from El Salvador's capital San Salvador and the municipality of San Marcos five miles southeast, stopped work on March 1 to protest harassment by gangs, who demand extortion payments.

According to the drivers, a group of gang members had demanded that the drivers pay an amount of money as "rent" for the privilege of operating in the area. When the drivers continued working, the gang members threatened them with death, saying, "If you don't pay the rent, you'll end up in the newspapers," a driver quoted one of the gang members.

Protest against Puerto Rican governor's "State of the Commonwealth" austerity message

Some 300 demonstrators gathered outside the Puerto Rican Capitol February 28 to protest the austerity agenda expressed in Governor Ricardo Rosselló's "State of the Commonwealth" speech before the House of Representatives. Various union officials demagogically denounced what they called "the wealthy's agenda" of across-the-board cuts to education, services and benefits, as well as privatizations, school closures and attacks on employees' rights demanded by the fiscal control board.

Various unions and social groups called the protest. Puerto Rican Workers Central (CPT) executive board member Victor Villalba complained to caribbeanbusiness.com that "We made some proposals" for budget cuts, but that Rosselló ignored the unions' attempts to get a seat at the table. He repeated the CPT's willingness to "engage in dialogue for the island's well-being."

Jamaican nurses hold sickouts over hospital air quality crisis

Nurses at the Cornwall Regional Hospital in Montego Bay, Jamaica began calling in sick on March 1. The nurses held the sickout to protest the inadequate response of the Ministry of Health to their complaints about the noxious fumes permeating most of the hospital, the largest in western Jamaica.

Some of the nurses have gotten ill from the fumes. Although one news outlet, nationwideradiojm.com, reported, "The hospital has been impacted by noxious emissions from its dysfunctional air conditioning unit since last October," another, rjronline.com, calls it "a decades-old issue."

On March 2, as the number of sick calls increased, representatives of the Nurses Association of Jamaica (NAJ) and the Jamaica Medical Doctors Association met for talks with the Health Minister, which continued the following day with the Medical Association of Jamaica joining in.

The government declared a "national crisis" and started relocating services, calling in the Jamaica Defense Force and the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management. Chief Medical Officer Dr. Winston De La Haye said that the crisis was equivalent to a hurricane passing through the country. According to De La Haye, "Operation Cornwall" will take nine months to a year to fix the problems.

But in what nationwideradiojm.com called "some good news,"

De La Haye said that based on the meetings with the union reps, he did not expect the staff at Cornwall to continue their “strike.” After the March 3 meeting, NAJ president Janet Coore-Farr called on nurses to return to work, saying that she was satisfied with the Ministry’s response to the nurses’ concerns. She added that the NAJ sympathizes with its members in “this difficult period.”

Pennsylvania nurses strike over deteriorating staffing levels

Some 370 nurses walked off the job March 5 on a two-day strike at Delaware County Memorial Hospital in Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania. The nurses, members of the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals (PASNAP), are protesting the deterioration of staffing levels at the hospital that have worsened since the leveraged buyout last year of the facility by Prospect Medical Holdings Inc.

Angela Neopolitano, a nurse with 36 years at the hospital, told CBS news, “We used to have five patients to one nurse on the floors. Now they’re giving us up to seven and eight. They’ve also cut our nurses’ aides. We used to have two for 20; now we have one for 20.”

Maureen Sullender, whose husband died of pancreatic cancer last year, complained of 10-hour delays moving her husband from emergency to a room and similar delays in providing medications. “They didn’t have the staff. It was really, really bad. The nurses, the people were really, really wonderful but there wasn’t enough of them... You see them running around like crazy... They’re overloaded. They have too many patients.”

Nurses voted to unionize with PASNAP last year and are negotiating their first contract. The union has filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) alleging the company illegally changed employee health insurance rates. The NLRB last week ruled on an earlier complaint alleging hospital management improperly withheld documents detailing Prospect’s purchase of Crozer-Keystone Health System, which owns Delaware County Memorial Hospital.

Ottawa University set to strike

One thousand instructors and 1,800 teaching assistants at Carleton University in Ottawa could be on strike this week after a weekend of mediated negotiations failed to yield a settlement in their dispute over a new contract.

It would be the first strike of its kind for these workers who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). The main issues according to union negotiators are wages and job security, with the school offering salary increases that do not even cover cost-of-living increases.

The university has said that any job action would not disrupt classes and that they are confident a deal can be reached.

Ontario Hearing Society faces strike action

At least 220 counselors, interpreters, instructors, audiologists and support staff at 25 Canadian Hearing Society (CHS) offices across the province went on strike Sunday night after working without a contract for over four years.

Negotiators for CUPE, the union representing CHS staff who provide services for the deaf and hearing impaired, say that they are fighting against measures instituted in recent years to move the agency towards a profit-based model and away from a focus on social service. In addition, union negotiators say they are fighting rollbacks to health benefits and deteriorating working conditions.

Talks with a government-appointed mediator are ongoing, but the situation is describe as “unpredictable.”

Toronto area university workers look to strike

Some 240 maintenance and trades workers at the University of Guelph, half an hour west of Toronto, will be in a strike or lockout position next week if a deal isn’t reached before then.

The workers are members of CUPE and voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action in January. The union has identified pensions, wages, contracting out and other matters related to job security as central issues in negotiations.

Mediated talks are ongoing this week and school administrators say that school activity will continue uninterrupted in the event of a strike.



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