

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

21 March 2017

## Mexican teachers strike over raise demand

Teachers at the Bachelor Degree College (Cobach) in the Mexican state of Chihuahua began a strike March 16 to demand the payment of a 3.8 percent raise and of unpaid benefits in accordance with their contract.

Their union, Staacobach, has appealed to the state to resolve the issue, but it has not. Instead, the sub-secretary of the State Government Social Communication Coordinator issued a statement describing the strike as “an act that directly affected the students and that lacked sufficient criteria” to be legitimate.

There were no classes on Monday, a holiday, but Staacobach has stated that it will carry out “phased strikes” if they do not get results.

## Puerto Rican teachers vote for strike against attacks on public education

Members of the Teachers Federation of Puerto Rico (FMPR) met in assembly March 18 and voted to strike beginning May 1. The FMPR has about 2,500 members.

Among the demands that the teachers will make are the derogation of the 2017 Law 10, which permits the municipalization of public schools, the scrapping or alteration of teacher evaluations and the repudiation of school closures and privatizations as recommended by the Federal Fiscal Control Board.

Other proposals included taxes on foreign corporations instead of restructuring of the retirement system and cuts to administrative costs inside the Education Department to finance the system.

A “people’s march in defense of public education” at the end of April was also approved.

## Massive protests in Brazil against changes to work rules and pension system

Protests across Brazil, involving hundreds of thousands, took place on March 15. The actions, which protested proposed changes to work rules and the social security system, included demonstrations, marches and, in one case, an occupation of a government office.

The mobilizations, called by the Workers Party and its allies in unions and the pseudo-left, protested changes to the nation’s retirement system, proposed by president Michel Temer, that would raise the age of eligibility for retirement. The labor law changes would “give companies more flexibility in hiring, including allowing longer temporary contracts, more part-time work and longer work days,” according to a caribbeanbusiness.com report.

In São Paulo, former president Lula Inacio da Silva of the Workers Party denounced the changes. Da Silva is being promoted as a 2018 candidate for president running on a supposedly anti-austerity program. “But as a matter of fact,” the WSWS reported on March 18, “virtually every measure imposed by the Temer administration had already been initiated by the Workers Party governments of presidents Dilma Rousseff and previously that of Lula da Silva.”

In the capital Brasilia, protesters joined members of the Landless Rural Workers Movement to occupy the Finance Ministry before being dislodged by military police. Although the nationwide protests were for the most part peaceful, confrontations with police broke out in Rio de Janeiro and a few other cities.

## Bermudan public service workers strike over wrongful dismissals

Workers for the Corporation of Hamilton—the seat of government in Bermuda—downed their tools on March 16 to demand the reinstatement of four workers from various departments. The four workers—Garreth Beam, Robert Lee, Delmair Trott and Gregory Wainwright—claim that they were sacked, in Mr. Lee’s words, because “They’re just looking for an excuse to get rid of staff. They say they’re trimming the fat.” Lee, a sanitation driver, was fired in July after six years’ work.

Trott, a machine operator with 14 years, Beam, with 18 years

in the parks department, and Wainwright, with 15 years as a sanitation worker, all agreed with Lee that management contrived provocations to fire them for “gross infractions.” They also agreed that the Bermuda Industrial Union “neglected to fight their case, forcing them to consult lawyers to take it further,” as reported in the *Royal Gazette* .

On the second day of the strike, about 20 workers gathered at the entrance to the Corporation carrying signs urging workers not to cross the picket line. The workers want a “third-party tribunal” to investigate their coworkers’ dismissals.

### **Dominica: Public workers protest wage freeze**

Public workers on the island of Dominica attended a “solidarity rally” called by the Dominica Public Service Union (DPSU) over the wage freeze in effect for the 2015-2018 budget. DPSU general secretary Thomas Letang waxed indignant over the union not being consulted for the last three years over salaries.

Letang did not explain why the union has not acted in the last three years regarding the wage issue, but said that the Dominica Air and Seaport Authority, the Dominica Water and Sewerage Company, Solid Waste Corporation and other public entities “have to find the money to pay us a salary increase.” According to a dominicanewsonline.com report, “The DPSU is not ruling out protest action,” including sickouts.

Letang said that the puncturing of his vehicle’s tires March 16 would not deter him. “I am not afraid,” he was quoted, saying that he is “ever more resolute and determined now,” and is “prepared to die for you.”

### **Teamsters return striking California transit workers to work without contract**

Some 120 transit workers with the Antelope Valley Transit Authority (ATVA) in northern Los Angeles County, California returned to work March 19 without a contract settlement after two days on strike. Teamsters Local 848 gave as a reason for the strike the fact that workers had had enough of “the company’s proposal to violate L.A. City and County minimum wage ordinances, low pay, lousy benefits, unfair and horrendous working conditions, and denial of our civil rights.”

The union’s reason for the suspension of the strike came as a result of ATVA CEO Len Engel’s announcement that he would cancel 95 percent of the authority’s bus service. Local 848 secretary-treasurer Eric Tate responded that the union was “shocked” because Local 848 had given ATVA “ample notice”

of the strike “and fully expected the company to continue service with replacement drivers.”

The rapid climb-down by the Teamsters indicates the possible fear that a strike could provide the pretext for a final shredding of transit services by the ATVA. Workers have been working without an agreement since February 28 when an extension of the old contract expired.

### **Quebec transit workers begin job action**

Transit workers, including drivers and maintenance workers employed by the Société de transport de l’Outaouais (STO) in Gatineau, Quebec, across the river from Ottawa, began rotating one-day strike action last week, leading up to a possible full strike in the coming days.

The workers are represented by the Syndicat uni du transport (SUT), who say they will consult with the rank and file again in April if the current round of job actions does not lead to fruitful negotiations. Issues in the dispute include wages and paid leave with the employer offering only 1.5 percent wage increases in the first three years of a five-year deal.

This dispute has heated up in recent weeks after the company suspended a number of union negotiators along with the vice president of the local. Workers at STO have been working without a contract since the end of 2014.

### **Ontario transit workers set to strike**

Skilled trades and service attendants employed by Grand River Transit (GRT) in the Region of Waterloo, west of Toronto, are in a legal strike position this week after negotiations broke off March 10.

The 644 workers, who are members of Unifor, voted almost unanimously in favor of strike action in February after working without a contract since the end of 2016. Both monetary and non-monetary issues including wages and working conditions are reportedly in dispute.

GRT has advised users to make alternative travel arrangements in anticipation of a strike while talks are scheduled to resume this week.



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