

British Columbia Safeway workers locked out

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Supermarket chain Safeway has locked out 600 workers at its premium Sobey's locations across the province of British Columbia. The move comes after management insisted on across-the-board concessions in contract negotiations with the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW).

Shortly after contract negotiations began, Safeway announced that it would be closing ten of its stores in the Greater Vancouver area. In an effort to force a concessions agreement, the company then stated that it would consider re-purposing five of those stores as its discount food chain FreshCo but only if a company friendly contract could be negotiated.

Union officials have filed a complaint with the Labour Relations Board accusing management of initiating an illegal lock-out, but have taken no measures to mobilize broader support in the working class for the locked out workers.

York University contract faculty and teaching assistants vote to strike

Contract faculty, teaching assistants, graduate assistants and librarians, all members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), voted by 85 percent to authorize strike action if ongoing negotiations fail to reach a settlement at York University in Toronto.

A central issue for the 3,700 members of the bargaining unit is job security—the same issue that has dominated contract battles in previous years, not only at York, but at universities and colleges throughout Canada. This past autumn, 12,000 Ontario community college teachers struck for five weeks against conditions of precarious employment pushed on them by college management before the Liberal government outlawed their action and forced them back to work.

In 2009, the Liberal government also forced striking York contract teachers back to work. In a bitter month-long strike in 2015, strikers rejected agreements on two occasions that were recommended by their union leadership before finally settling. In the current round of negotiations, York University management has issued a letter to the CUPE members that once again seeks to intimidate them with the threat of anti-strike legislation.

Mexican academic workers accept management pay offer

With 1,314 in favor, 8 opposed and 9 abstentions, members of the Independent Syndicate of Academic Workers of the Autonomous

University of the State of Morelos (SITUAEM) in Cuernavaca voted February 1 to call off their strike scheduled for the next day. The vote was taken following an offer by the rectory of a 3.4 percent raise to salaries and one percent in benefits.

SITUAEM claimed that the raise, together with benefits for teaching materials and other expenses would reach around 5.9 and help workers “confront” the rising cost of living. However, the inflation rate in Mexico had already risen to 6.77 percent in the last month, a 16-and-a-half-year high, according to a January 9 Reuters report.

SITUAEM has said that it is disposed to discuss modifications in the collective contract over such items as clothing allowances, optical care, grants and other benefits.

Another union, the UAEM Administrative Workers Union (STAUAE), which had also called for a strike, held its own assembly the same day as the SITUAEM, but failed to reach a consensus. The union's secretary general told reporters that the 3.4 percent “since it is not sufficient for the members, nor does it fulfill the expectations of the workers,” and claimed that “this increment is inferior to the rise in the minimum wage.”

Mexican university workers in Oaxaca end strike

Workers at the Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca (UABJO) began a strike at midnight, February 1 over 65 points in a petition submitted by their union, the UABJO Workers and Employees Syndicate (STEUBJO). The union had submitted the petition in November, but “the disinterest of university authorities generated the intensification of their protests during the last weeks and the strike...”

Among STEUBJO's principal demands were a 20 percent salary hike, increases in benefits and the “basic basket” (cost of living), contract revisions, retirement payments and granting of permanent status (“basification”) to 400 casual workers.

The UABJO rector warned that he would begin the judicial process requesting the declaration of illegality of the strike, declaring that “a few [STEUBJO] directors” were responsible for the impasse. The rectory then presented a new set of proposals to the Local Conciliation and Arbitration Board.

The rectory's latest proposal included a 3.4 percent wage raise, the addition of 22 pesos (US\$1.18) to the “basic basket,” and the basification of 37 of the casual workers. The rectory also proposed to attend to the retirement applications of 37 workers by establishing a mechanism in stages to retire first 16, later 11 and finally the remaining 10 workers. A general assembly called by the union voted February 3 to accept the proposals and return to work on February 6.

Trinidad and Tobago: Cement workers protest retrenchment plans

Workers for Trinidad Cement Limited (TCL) held two early morning protests—on January 29 and February 2—in front of the company’s Claxton Bay headquarters. The workers demonstrated against a wave of redundancies that have already targeted between 80 and 100 workers, out of a workforce of 300, with TCL bringing in replacement workers to perform the same jobs. So far, TCL has earmarked 16 workers for retrenchment and another eight for redeployment.

The protests included prayer meetings, with Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU) branch president Ahmad Mohammed telling reporters that they were meant to seek divine guidance for the workers as well as for executive management.

The OWTU had signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with TCL in 2014, agreeing to a 20 percent wage cut when TCL claimed to be in dire financial straits. The MOA was supposedly an interim measure, but the firm has maintained the reduced wage rate and is now bringing in workers from outside Trinidad and Tobago while targeting workers for retrenchment. The OWTU claims that this is a breach of the law.

The OWTU and company officials scheduled a meeting for February 5.

Laid off Guyanese sugar workers continue severance pay protests

Hundreds of retrenched sugar plantation workers, their wives and children staged a protest on February 1 in front of Guyana’s Ministry of the Presidency in the capital Georgetown February 1. The workers had formerly been employed at the Wales Estate, where they were made redundant over a year ago when the government closed a number of state-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) estates in the name of restructuring the sugar industry.

The government had reassigned some of the workers to Uitvlugt, West Coast Demerara estate, but over 370 cane cutters were denied severance pay for refusing to travel the 22 miles to work there. They contend that, under Guyanese labor law, they cannot be compelled to make the daily trip. Meanwhile, the workers have experienced difficulties making ends meet and cannot afford to send their children to school.

The protest followed a January 27 visit to two sugar estates—one still operating but slated for sale, one already shut down—by a government delegation including the Prime Minister and the Agriculture Minister. Thousands of irate protesters attended both meetings, and they drowned out the speeches, which consisted of rationales for the closures and denunciations of the opposition Peoples Progressive Party (PPP).

Chilean trash collectors strike for better wages and conditions

Sanitation workers in the central Chilean city of Lota walked off the job on January 30 to press their demands. Their employer, Himce, is contracted to the municipality for trash collection. The striking workers demanded a raise as well as improvements in working conditions, most notably in the condition and quantity of sanitary facilities.

On February 1, the workers marched to the municipal building. Union president Juan Carlos Cisternas told *Diario del Sur* reporters, “We’re asking that they respect our rights and we understand that the process could be delayed more than expected, but it isn’t possible that an enterprise that accumulates 15 grave offenses in respect to the bidding

contract keeps functioning.” Himce’s contract with the city expires in September.

St. Paul teachers authorize strike

The St. Paul Federation of Teachers reported that 85 percent of teachers voted to authorize strike action in a ballot conducted January 31. Ninety-two percent of educational assistants and 82 percent of school and community professionals also voted in favor of strike.

The union filed a notice of intent to strike on February 1, starting a 10-day countdown to a possible strike. Two more mediated sessions between the SPFT and management were set for February 6 and 7.

Teachers in St. Paul conducted the first ever US organized teacher strike in 1946. The last strike in the district was 1989. The main issues in dispute are wages and benefits, improved facilities and increased staffing levels.

Fast food workers strike in Portland, Oregon

Workers at two Burgerville fast food locations in Portland, Oregon carried through a three-day strike to demand union recognition. The workers are affiliated to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and are seeking a \$5 an hour raise, affordable health benefits, scheduling rules and maternity leave. One worker told Eater, “You know how rent is in Portland, I have to have two jobs to have a little place... I’d like to not have to donate plasma anymore to make rent.”

The strike is also in protest of the firing of 6 workers for what strikers allege are pro-union sympathies and organizing efforts. Some 25 workers from the two locations walked off the job on February 1. Burgerville, an independent chain, operates 44 fast food operations and employs 1,300 workers in Oregon and Washington.

The AFL-CIO has endorsed the strike, which is to say it has carried out toothless measures to support the workers by bringing out Democratic politicians, clergy, limited solidarity picketing and the filing of unfair labor practices charges.



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