

Jamaican teachers stay away from work to protest wage offer

## Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

### Jamaican teachers stay away from work to protest wage offer

Primary and high school teachers in Jamaica stayed home for three days beginning Monday, March 12. The government had offered a 16 percent raise over four years to public employees. Though some public sector workers' unions accepted the raise, the Jamaica Teachers Association (JTA) did not. The government then said that, since it was not going to budge from its initial offer, it would unilaterally apply the raise.

According to an *rjrnews* online report, the teachers "have opted to go on work-to-rule, sit-in or strike to register their dissatisfaction." The adherence to the strike was inconsistent, which led to students showing up at some schools, but not teachers, and in some cases vice versa. Some principals closed their schools, while the government said that it had ordered that they stay open.

JTA President Georgia Waugh Richards said on the first day that she was unable to speak about the strike. Interviewed on a radio program the next day, she denied that teachers were on strike and insisted that they were sick. When asked what had caused the illness of so many teachers, she said that the union was in the process of finding out.

### Mexican medical school staff and students strike over petition

Students joined teachers and auxiliary personnel in a shutdown of activities March 15 at the National School of Medicine and Homeopathy (ENMH), part of the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN), in Mexico City. The workers and students sought a response to a petition with a number of demands, among them the removal of the current director, improvements in scheduling of classes, sufficient instructors, better study areas, and more security on the campus.

Also included in the students' demands were provision of transportation, subsidized meals, updating of the library, enough teacher's aides and democratization of the Technical Consultative Council.

Specific to the professors' demands were reinstatement of colleagues suspended by the administration, dignified and respectful treatment, adequate labor and academic conditions and no reprisals for the shutdown.

The strike was called off at the end of the day when the three parties agreed to set up meetings to discuss the demands. The dismissal of the ENMH director was not included among the items to discuss.

### Strike by Haitian customs workers over status, pay ends

The strike begun March 5 by Haitian customs and postal workers ended March 13 when the Association of Haitian Customs (ADH) announced that the government had agreed to publish the law regarding the special status of customs workers. The government had promised to publish the status change, which also entails a pay raise, within 90 days of January 2017, when it signed the pledge.

As tensions rose during the strike, the government canceled the customs workers' right to carry weapons. They also sent in National Police (CIMO and UDMO) agents to unload vessels. The ADH issued a communiqué stating that "officials have preferably appealed to armed men in the pay of some strong men of the country to proceed with the unloading of the ships, very late in the evening of March 10, at the Port of Port-au-Prince" and deploring "the manifest will of some officials to undermine the solid foundation of the initialed Memorandum of Understanding on October 21, 2017, by using the CIMO and UDMO agents to prohibit the access of customs agents to their workstations," as reported by *haitilibre.com*.

On March 11, a judge had ordered the customs agents to return to work the next day, but the agents defied the order. However, they set up emergency cells in the main customs offices, which took charge of customs clearance and delivery of medicines, antiretroviral drugs, human blood bags, aid shipments, oxygen cylinders and bodies of deceased repatriated to the country.

It is not known when or if the government will rescind the weapons prohibition.

### Panama: Dozens of arrests and some injuries at renovation project strike and protest

In the early hours of March 13, residents of the city of Colón, at the Caribbean entrance of the Panama Canal, held a general strike and protest march. The mobilizations, called by a group called the Broad Front of Colón (FAC), protested the manner in which the Urban Renovation of Colón project has been carried out. They also had a list of demands centered on poverty, unemployment, crime, lack of potable water, closure of businesses, lack of decent health care facilities and other issues that have been aggravated by the project.

Residents also fear that the over-\$500 million project, which is being carried out by construction giant Odebrecht, infamous for its role in the Lava Jato corruption scandal, will result in the gentrification of the historic Casco Antiguo neighborhood and lead to evictions and unaffordable housing. The FAC has sent petitions to the president, but has not received a response.

The day began peacefully as protesters marched through the city's

streets. However, toward the end of the march, some people wearing hoods and masks began throwing rocks at police, who counterattacked with tear gas and rubber bullets. Some looting and vandalism ensued, for which police arrested about 40 people. The Minister of the Presidency later blamed “groups of delinquents, aided by people with political interests and others from organized crime.”

The FAC disassociated itself from the violence. One FAC spokesman asserted that the police had militarized the area days before and that the problems “don’t date from now, they’re decades old and they haven’t been resolved.” The next day a smaller protest was held without incidents.

## **Two-day strike by Argentine municipal workers over pay demand**

Following failed parity talks with representatives of the Communal Mayors and Presidents association of Argentina’s Santa Fe province, the Municipal Workers Union Federation (Festram) issued a communiqué on March 12 calling for a 48-hour strike March 14 and 15. Secretaries-general of the Festram-affiliated unions were to assemble in a plenary session March 19 to plan for the parity talks that were set to resume on the 20th.

The government bargainers had refused to budge from their offer of a 16 percent raise to be applied in three stages: 7 percent in March, 4 percent in July and 5 percent in October. Festram called the offer insufficient, since inflation is projected to rise to at least 19 percent in 2018.

Festram claimed a participation rate of 98 percent involving state, municipal and education workers from the province’s 316 localities. In the provincial capital, thousands of workers marched to the Plaza de Mayo for a rally. Speakers denounced not only the provincial government, but the national administration of Mauricio Macri, who has pressured the provinces to maintain a ceiling of 15 percent on raises.

## **West Virginia steelworkers locked out**

The 71 workers at the Tecnocap manufacturing facility in Glen Dale, West Virginia, were locked out March 12 after several months of negotiations failed to produce an agreement between management and the United Steel Workers (USW). Tecnocap wants to abolish the grievance procedure, do away with arbitration, wipe out two of the highest wage classifications and lower starting pay by \$1 an hour for new hires.

The two sides have been holding negotiations since October. On March 5, the company posted its first notice that they would conduct a lockout. On March 9, company negotiators issued their final offer and charged that the union did not conduct a vote on that proposal. Security guards carrying a list met workers entering the plant on the morning of March 12 and only allowed those workers who pay union dues to enter and work.

Tecnocap, based out of Italy, has more than 850 employees and is the world’s third-largest manufacturer of metal closures for glass and plastic containers. It has eight production facilities in five different countries, including two in the United States operating in West Virginia and Ohio.

## **Union Pacific uses drones to monitor on workers**

Workers at Union Pacific Corporation are roiled by the company’s use

of drones to monitor their work. A company spokesperson has claimed, “We are finding drones are valuable tools that can help us reach our ultimate goal of operating in an incident-free environment and ensure employees go home safely.”

But workers believe rather than the promotion of safety, the company will use them for disciplinary purposes that can lead to termination.

The FAA first approved of drones for Union Pacific in 2015 to inspect railroad track and bridges. Starting in December 2017, the company began using them to spy on employees. Currently, the company has 126 certified drone pilots and hopes to have 250 by the end of 2018.

## **Toronto-area school bus drivers to strike**

School bus drivers in the Bowmanville area, east of Toronto, who are employed by transportation company First Student Canada will be off the job this week after their union Unifor issued a strike notice last week.

Union negotiators cite low wages and unpaid work hours as central issues in the contract talks, which have lasted over six months. The strike will mean that bus service will be interrupted at three school boards in the region, affecting at least 40 public and Catholic schools.

The drivers have been in a legal strike position since December of last year, but negotiations, which have resumed this week, were off and on throughout February.

## **Alberta legal-aid workers set to strike**

Seventy workers at the Legal Aid Society of Alberta in Edmonton and Calgary could be on strike this week if an agreement is not reached through ongoing mediated talks.

Negotiators for the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), who are bargaining agents for the workers affected, claim that they are fighting a range of issues including staffing cuts, office closures, higher demand and increased workloads that the employer is refusing to address.

The possible strike action would include primarily low-paid call-center workers whom the employer has threatened to rapidly replace in the event of a work stoppage. Bargaining has been ongoing for almost a year, including unsuccessful mediated talks last October.

## **Yukon bus drivers take job action**

Bus drivers in the city of Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, are taking limited job action that may include a full-on strike this week as part of the ongoing conflict between the city and its workforce.

A spokesman for the Yukon Employees Union says the city is demanding a range of concessions around working conditions, severance pay and bonuses for long-term employees. The union had refused to say what form the strike would take, but the city has given public assurances that transportation service would be maintained.

At the same time, the union has refused to call a strike for other municipal workers who are also in a legal strike position pending a long-awaited decision on essential service designations.



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