

## Strike at York University in Canada begins its fourth week

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 March 2018

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### York University strike begins fourth week

About 3,000 contract-teachers and research and teaching assistants, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903, are continuing their strike at York University in north Toronto. The strikers are demanding substantial pay increases, as most currently receive poverty wages, and in addition want enhanced job security. Contract faculty are frequently employed on a semester-to-semester basis, meaning they have to reapply for their posts every few months.

About half of all classes at the university have been cancelled, with attendance at those classes that still continue reduced by as much as 50 percent. The university has refused to cancel classes despite calls from student and faculty representatives and an occupation of the institution's Senate chamber by student supporters of the strike.

Last Tuesday, union and university negotiators returned briefly to the bargaining table. Local 3903 Chairman Devin Lefebvre told reporters that his team had withdrawn several union demands in order to move negotiations forward. However, the employer's bargaining team abruptly terminated further discussions, stating that while a number of issues were settled, they remain far apart on wages and on the number of conversions of contract faculty to full-time positions and funding for graduate students.

Subsequently, the union filed three unfair labour practices complaints alleging that the university has sent misleading statements to students and even built a web site with a union web address that directs students to a page controlled by the university.

Since the strike began, CUPE—whether at the local, regional, or national level—has remained silent on the threat of government intervention and the Wynne Liberal

government's role in imposing austerity, casting the struggle in the most narrow collective bargaining terms. Yet, only last November, the Ontario government imposed back-to-work legislation on 12,000 college teachers.

### Buenos Aires transit workers protest over jobs and unpaid wages

On March 22, transit workers at three bus lines mobilized, blocked traffic, and rallied at the Labor Ministry, and contingent rail employees rallied at the commuter stations and maintenance facilities. The employees of bus lines 112, 165 and 243 belong to a private company. The protest strike was triggered by unpaid wages and by the disrepair of the company equipment, whose assets are being stripped. Out of the 140 buses owned by the firm, less than half are in "working order." The workers, who walked out on March 15, are demanding that the government seize the company from its present owners and re-capitalize it.

On the contingent, employees of the C15 rail line carried out a "day of struggle" to protest layoffs by the company in the form of so-called vacation days. On Friday, at the Moron and Villa Luro train station, many passengers joined the rally in support of the contingent employees, 150 of whom had been informed, in phone calls the previous Friday, not to show up for work for periods of between one and three weeks.

### Protest against Mexican government inaction on missing students

The disappearance of three film students in the town of Tonalá, Javier Salomón, 25, Daniel Díaz, 20, and Marco Ávalos, 20, filming for a school project, triggered a march

by 4,000 University of Guadalajara students and workers on March 24. It appears that government agents picked up the three students as they repaired their car by the side of the road. Also disappeared was César Ulixes Arellano, 18, a University of Guadalajara medical student, who was last seen boarding a bus on Monday March 19.

The aim of the protest, which coincided with mass protest marches in the US against shooting violence, was to denounce the indifference of state and federal authorities to the hundreds of students that are disappeared each year. Many students were dressed in white and carried signs saying, “It is dangerous to be a student” and “Am I next?”

In less than three days, six students were disappeared in Jalisco State, and two were later found.

Student protesters pointed out that it took State of Jalisco authorities a crucial 48 hours to announce its intention to investigate the incident. Many fear that, as is often the case, the entire matter will have been forgotten after Easter week.

### **Chile: protest by Haitian berry workers over unpaid wages**

More than 120 contingent immigrant blueberry workers protested in the Chilean capital of Santiago over wages owed to them by the Austral Berry Company, which grows and processes blueberries for export to the United States and Europe.

The workers, most of them from Haiti, where hired at the beginning of this year (the end of summer, in the Southern Hemisphere) for the berry harvest, which lasts about three months.

The company showed its total indifference to the plight of these impoverished workers. A spokesperson of Austral Berry justified the company’s actions, explaining that on payday, last Wednesday, the company had run out of funds and had been able to pay only a portion of its agricultural workers. All others, she said, would have to wait until the end of April.

### **Northern Illinois University faculty and staff protest over contract**

Faculty and staff at Northern Illinois University are carrying out weekly protests over stalled talks on a collective bargaining agreement. The members of the American

Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees have been without a contract for two years. About 1,000 employees are in the bargaining unit, including 600 operational staff.

The workers say a 3 percent raise passed by the Board of Trustees is inadequate, saying they want periodic raises. However, the board has held up implementation of the 3 percent increase pending the conclusion of bargaining.

### **Abuse of immigrant workers exposed at large Kansas ranch**

A report by the Associated Press has exposed severe exploitation of immigrant workers at a large ranch in the region of Syracuse, Kansas. Workers called conditions at the Fullmer Cattle Company ranch “like slavery.”

One of the workers, Esteban Cornejo, a Mexican immigrant, worked at the ranch for eight months putting in 15-hour days, six days a week at \$10 an hour. His pre-tax income was \$1,828.34. Fullmer deducted \$1,300 from his pay to repay the company for the cost of smuggling him into the country, or what management termed a “cash advance repayment.” As a result, Cornejo received a little over \$200 during that pay period, or what amounted to \$1 an hour.

The company, which supplies cows to 18 dairies across four states, boasts that it has “lower labor costs.” In 1998, a raid on the owner’s ranch in Chino, California, uncovered what was described as “economic slavery.”



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