Argentina: Patagonian teachers vote to strike

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Porto Alegre, Brazil government workers vote to strike

On February 22 government workers of Porto Alegre, the capital of the state Rio Grande do Sul, voted to strike against proposed legislation by municipal authorities to downgrade wages and benefits.

The proposal would lower the current automatic seniority raise of 5 percent every three years down to 3 percent every five years. Other proposals aim to replace full-time employees with part-timers.

Municipal authorities claim that the new measure would save some US$5 million annually.

Argentina: Patagonian teachers vote to strike

Teachers in the Patagonian province of Santa Cruz voted on February 23 to delay the beginning of the school year (which in Argentina begins this week). At issue is the lack of wage increases for three years, and the layoff of thousands of education workers. The teachers are demanding an immediate wage reopener.

Provincial authorities have imposed brutal austerity measures on public employees and teachers. Elementary and secondary classrooms have been shut down, crowding students into less and less classrooms, taught by fewer teachers. Virtual online education has replaced night schools for adults, further reducing teaching staffs, along with administrators and maintenance crews.

Teachers also point out that many of the schools in the province are so deteriorated that teaching becomes unsanitary and hazardous. They complain about leaking gas lines, collapsed sewage lines and broken bathrooms. Those complaints have been largely ignored by provincial authorities.

While it is estimated that the minimum income for a household in Santa Cruz is 32,000 pesos, teachers' salaries are in the 20,000-peso range.

Ohio charter school teachers strike

Teachers at Summit Academy charter school in Parma, Ohio went on strike February 19 to protest a range of complaints, including class sizes, staffing, caseloads and preparation time. The Alliance for Charter Teachers and Staff (ACTS), which represents the 24 teachers at Summit Academy, voted unanimously to strike January 31 and held a fruitless negotiating session that broke down early February 16.

Summit serves some 200 students, many of whom are special needs students suffering a range of problems. At a February 13 school board meeting, parents and students blasted board members for not keeping promises made to them about staffing and solidarized with the teachers strike.

Abby Fischer, whose daughter attends Summit Academy, told Cleveland.com, "Two teachers per classroom was the promise parents were given when I first enrolled my ... So, the teachers have tried every possible avenue and have been turned down time and time again. Unfortunately, I think [a strike] is probably the only thing that's going to get their attention at this point."

Summit canceled classes the first two days of the strike, but as of February 21, management had planned to go ahead with plans to replace striking teachers.

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The Ohio Federation of Teachers (OFT), of which ACTS is an affiliate, has not sought to unite charter school teachers with the simmering movement of public school teachers. Instead, OFT has attempted to turn the strike down the blind alley of appeals to the courts by issuing an Unfair Labor Practice charge against Summit management.

Teamsters authorize strike action against Industrial Container Services

Seattle Teamsters, members of IBT Local 117, have unanimously rejected the latest contract offer from Industrial Container Services on February 16. ICS is seeking contract language containing non-negotiable changes to working conditions, cuts in health and welfare benefits, and minimum-wage pay levels. The company has also attempted to fold contributions to pensions agreed upon in the present contract into union proposals for wages in a new agreement.

In 2014 workers rebelled against 19th-century working conditions imposed on them by ICS. They had only one source of water, which was from a rusty pipe. Their break room was an unsanitary disaster site of smashed-up lockers, and there was no accommodation to wash their hands cleanly.

ICS has no measures to protect its employees from the toxic chemicals that they must clean from the barrels provided to companies for removal of industrial waste. Although the present contract forced ICS to provide a new break room, new clean water fixtures and new lockers, the company is now trying to claw back even those minimal gains from its workers.

B.C. library workers vote to strike

Library workers at the Powell River Public Library, northwest of Vancouver B.C., voted unanimously to go on strike last week after working without a contract since December of 2017.

The workers affected are represented in contract talks by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) whose negotiators cite pay equity with other city workers and even other library workers in the province as a major obstacle in reaching a new deal. According to the union, their starting wage is 10 percent below their counterparts with comparable skill sets in other city departments.

Immediately upon being handed a strike mandate, union leaders undertook to file for a mediated settlement with the Labour Board. The union local represents a total of 215 workers, including Powell River city workers who are also currently in contract negotiations.

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