

Retired teachers on hunger strike across Ecuador

## Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 July 2019

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Retired teachers from across Ecuador initiated a hunger strike last week to demand the payment of retirement checks that are owed to many of them. The money, five months' pay for each year worked (in the case of teachers that retire with 30 years seniority), is owed to some 7,000 former teachers across Ecuador who retired after 2016. They are collectively owed US\$900 million.

Last March, following another hunger-strike, the government of Lenin Moreno agreed to budget \$350 million to begin settling with the teachers on June 9. The government failed to do this. The teachers point out that over 600 recently retired teachers have died without receiving a penny and as a consequence they have decided to reinitiate their hunger strike. Scores of teachers camped out in two tents across from the national legislature now vow that they will not give up their action until their claims are settled.

The Moreno administration has offered teachers payment in government bonds instead of US dollars. Teachers have rejected this because of the heavy discount they must pay banks to convert their bonds into cash (Ecuador's official currency is the US dollar). The Quito business daily *El Comercio* spoke to hunger striker William Carrera. "I do not feel so well, but we are here until the end. I do it for myself, my family, my teacher comrades," said Carrera, who retired in 2016 and is owed \$53,000. He refuses to accept bonds. "It is a loss for us, because the exchange house will discount between \$14,000 and \$16,000 from our checks."

### Panamá dock workers on strike

On July 26 striking port workers at the Panamanian ports of Cristóbal and Balboa, met with government officials over their demands. The strike by dockworkers against Panama Ports Company began on July 17. A large contingent of strikers marched on the government house in Panamá City.

The port workers have been without a contract for eight months. They are demanding a wage increase to compensate for the rising cost of living and better working conditions. Company officials accused the workers of acting outside the law. In response the government of newly installed president Laurentino Cortizo Cohen has offered to mediate between the company and the 1,200 strikers. However, workers suspect that a deal is being crafted behind their backs.

### Argentina teachers mobilize in Salta and Chubut provinces for a living wage

Last Friday striking teachers in Argentina's Jujuy province rejected the government's latest offer and voted to continue their 10-day strike. The issues are a 7.5 percent wage increase and the demand that all future monthly wage increases be pegged to the preceding month's inflation rate.

The rejection of the government proposal took place at a rally two days after a brutal repression by Salta Police of a march of teachers that had set out to rally at the provincial legislature in Salta, the provincial capital.

Argentine teachers are also protesting and mobilizing in the Patagonian province of Chubut. In both provinces teachers are battling in two fronts—against the provincial governments and against their own trade unions that are keeping the struggles isolated from each

other and from the rest of the working class more broadly.

### **Alaska ferry workers continue strike**

Workers on the Alaska ferry system that connects towns along the coast have struck for the first time in 42 years. The strike started July 24 and has halted traffic on the Alaska Marine Highway System. The ferries serve 32 towns that are not connected to the outside world via roads due to their isolation and the rugged nature of the terrain.

The state has offered a 5 percent wage increase over three years while the union proposed 9 percent, barely above inflation. Workers are also asking to choose their own ship assignments.

The 430 deckhands and other crew are members of the Inlandboatmen's Union of the Pacific. Two other unions represent ship masters, mates, pilots and marine engineers, but these workers are honoring picket lines.

Talks between the ferry workers and the state have gone on for two-and-a-half years. State officials have attempted to mobilize the public against the workers by pointing to the hardships to local residents caused by the strike.

The US state of Alaska is facing budget issues due to a decline in oil revenues. Governor Mike Dunleavy had initially proposed cutting a massive \$97 million from the ferry system.

### **Oregon home care workers protest late payment of salaries**

A group of 50 home care workers rallied outside the Department of Human Services (DHS) in Salem, Oregon, July 25 to protest the agency's policy of issuing paychecks late to workers, which is causing economic hardship among the workforce. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which represents about 30,000 home care workers in the state, found in a survey preliminary to contract talks that out

of 2,000 workers, 42 percent are not receiving paychecks on time.

According to the SEIU the problem is caused by a software error and it has plagued the workforce since the 1990s. "People are getting evicted from their homes, their credit is getting ruined," the SEIU's Rebecca Sandoval told the rally.

The computer system deletes time cards and when workers notify the DHS, they are asked to provide proof of work. The process can take months to resolve.

### **Strike mandate by Casino Regina workers**

Workers at Casino Regina in Saskatchewan have voted overwhelmingly for strike authorization, according to Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). No firm strike deadline has been set, but workers are in a legal position to walk out. Talks have dragged on between PSAC and the Saskatchewan Gaming Commission (SGC) since September 2017.

The 335 gaming employees have been without a contract since December 31, 2016. The PSAC has continued talks despite the fact that gaming officials have yet to present a decent offer. In a damning admission of the union's own bankruptcy, PSAC regional vice-president Marianne Hladun declared, "SGC has tabled an offer which does not even keep up with inflation, which would in effect mean a pay cut for these workers who are already among the lowest paid employees in the Crown sector."

Gambling is a major source of revenue for Saskatchewan, preying on the poorest sections of society. The gaming commission reported \$46.4 million in net income in 2017-2018 on revenues of \$119.4 million.



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