

Uruguayan health care workers strike, teachers poised to walk out in Washington state, British Columbia

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 August 2019

Belizean hospital workers protest shortages

Workers at the Southern Regional Hospital in Dangriga, Belize held a protest in front of the facility on August 23 to demand that the national government resolve problems that have plagued the hospital and its community for years. These include the lack of medications and equipment, job stress for personnel, a dysfunctional morgue, and poor working conditions and sanitation.

The Southern Workers Union (SWU), which called the protest, also accused the hospital of poor medical care and incorrect diagnoses, resulting in preventable deaths. The SWU also claims that because the southern region is neglected by the central government, the area does not receive adequate resources.

Bahamian doctors strike to demand overdue pay

Around 420 junior doctors at hospitals on New Providence and Grand Bahama, the two largest of the islands in the Bahamas, walked off the job on August 21. The doctors struck to press their demand for holiday pay covering the period between June 16, 2014 and October 31, 2018. Nonessential services were stopped, though emergency services continued.

In December last year, the doctors voted overwhelmingly to strike over the pay issue, but the Bahamas Doctors Union (BDU) instead continued to negotiate with the Public Hospitals Authority (PHA) until reaching an agreement that followed a predictable pattern.

According to BDU president Dr. Melisande Bassett, “We’ve had meetings back and forth. They’ve vacillated. They’ve said they’ll pay. They start to pay then they stop.

“We’ve had demonstrations. We’ve threatened strike action in the past. We’ve come back to the table. Most recently, they told us that they’d pay us over five installments...”

In a stroke of understatement, Bassett added, “To us, that’s unacceptable.”

A planned meeting on August 23 between the BDU and the PHA fell through, extending the strike to August 26.

In a related development, hundreds of public services workers, members of the Bahamas Public Services Union (BPSU), staged a sickout and protested in the rain in front of the Cabinet office in the capital Nassau on August 23 to demand a meeting with the prime minister over back payments. The Labour Director, a former BPSU president, noting that the prime minister has offered to pay the overdue money, about US\$1,200 per worker, in two installments, told reporters, “It’s better to have half a loaf

of bread than none at all.”

Uruguayan health workers union calls 24-hour national strike over management intransigence in negotiations

The Uruguayan Health Federation (FUS) called a one-day national strike by public sector health care workers on August 23. FUS secretary general Jorge Bermúdez told Radio Uruguay on August 22 the walkout was due to the fact that “the business sector is not disposed to comply with elements that were approved in the salary council in the collective agreement signed last year.” Accusing the employers of preventing “all possibility of coming to an agreement with the objective of not fixing salaries,” he said that the workers’ response would be the 24-hour strike.

Bermúdez said the employers wanted to make labor more “flexible” and do away with the eight-hour day. He also pointed to recent firings and nonpayment of salaries at some private health facilities.

More voting to join potential strike by 85,000 Kaiser Permanente workers

About 3,500 workers in Colorado employed by health care giant Kaiser Permanente are starting to vote this week on authorizing a strike in early October. More than 57,000 workers in California, and another 4,500 in Washington state and Oregon voted by 98 percent to authorize a walkout.

According to a coalition of unions, Kaiser is proposing 3 percent pay raises each year for four years to California workers and a 15 percent pay cut for new hires. Workers outside California are offered 1-2 percent raises. The coalition, which includes the Service Employees International Union, is counter-proposing a five-year agreement with yearly raises of 4, 3, 3, 4, and 4 percent for workers in all regions, and no pay cuts for new hires.

The company, which made \$5.2 billion in profits in the first six months of 2019, has rejected the union’s meager proposal, claiming it would raise the cost of health care. Contracts between Kaiser and 11 union locals in California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maryland, Oregon, Virginia, Washington state and Washington DC, either have expired or will expire by September 30. The national contract expired in September 2018 and the unions have dragged out the strike authorization process over months hoping to get some offer from the company the unions could sell to restive workers.

Chicago teachers return to work without new contract

More than 20,000 teachers and other educators reported to school to set up their classrooms August 26 without a new contract two months after the last one expired. The Chicago Teachers Union, which is scrambling with Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to reach a deal before schools officially open on September 3, announced Monday that it had rejected a state-appointed fact-finder's contract proposal. Mayor Lightfoot said the city is sweetening the deal by upping its offer of a 14 percent raise over the next five years to 16 percent.

The CTU hopes to beat down teachers' expectations by subjecting them to a 30-day cooling off period, mandated by a state law backed by the union, that would prohibit a strike until the end of September. Teachers are determined to recoup lost income from a decade of pay freezes accepted by the CTU. The CTU betrayed a strike by educators in 2012, which paved the way for school closings and mass layoffs.

Washington state teachers poised to strike

Teachers in the central Washington state school district of Kennewick have threatened to walk out August 27, the first day of school, if a tentative contract agreement is not reached with officials from the 19,000-student school district. Teachers rallied outside their school buildings Monday and then reported to work to set up their classrooms while the Kennewick Education Association continued state-mediated talks. With teachers angered over poor pay, the union's bargaining team rejected the district's offer of a 7.1 percent salary increase in the 2019-20 school year plus a 3 percent increase in 2020-21.

Meanwhile, teachers in La Center, Washington, 28 miles north of Portland, Oregon, have voted 75-1 to strike if a new contract deal isn't reached by the first day of school next week. The *Columbian* reported last week that the La Center School District and its teachers' union are working with a mediator in hopes of avoiding a strike on Wednesday, the first day of school.

Teachers in many Washington school districts went on strike in 2018 after schools got an influx of money because of a state Supreme Court ruling that the state's education system was underfunded and in violation of the state constitution. The unions opposed a statewide strike, and instead isolated each walkout, signing district-by-district agreements. The La Center teachers union signed a one-year contract that gave them a 6.8 percent increase in total salary compensation, with a 7.8 percent increase for those with 25 years of experience or more. That contract has now expired.

Contract impasse for Oregon public university employees

Service Employees International Union Local 53 has declared an impasse in negotiations with administrators at Oregon's seven public universities. Both the union and management have until Friday to submit final contract offers before a tightly regulated process begins that will not allow workers to give notice to strike until after a 30-day "cooling off period." Thousands of library technicians, office workers and custodial staff oppose meager pay offers and threats of layoffs.

The union is asking for a small 3.5 percent cost-of-living adjustment for 2020 while the universities propose a 1.25 percent cost-of-living increase.

Management is claiming that keeping wage increases below the rate of inflation is necessary to keep tuition costs down for low- and moderate-income students. The SEIU and other unions, which are allied with the Democratic-controlled state government, have no intention of challenging the Democrats' decades-long austerity measures, which have been used to shower tax breaks on Nike and other corporations.

British Columbia teachers nearing end of mediated bargaining

Forty-three thousand teachers, members of the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF), will end a period of mediation this week with the provincial public school employer's association. The teachers have been in discussions since January with the association over the issues of wages, class size and class composition. Their contract expired last June with the school year in BC beginning in less than two weeks. A New Democratic Party government, supported by the unions, currently holds power in the province.

In 2014, teachers struck for five weeks against the province's Liberal Party government. In that strike, BCTF abandoned teachers' key demands and signed onto an agreement that did very little to reverse the impact of the Liberal government's assault on public education. That assault resulted in well over \$3 billion in cumulative budget cuts and the elimination of more than 4,000 teaching jobs over the dozen years of Liberal rule.

Under the 2014 contract (retroactive to 2013), British Columbia's teachers, who are among the lowest paid in Canada and hadn't had a wage increase since 2010, received a wage rise of 7.25 percent spread over six years, or roughly 1.2 percent per annum.

The current contract battle in BC occurs as almost 200,000 high school, grade school and Catholic school teachers in Ontario—also all without a contract as the school year begins—face the Conservative government of Ontario premier Doug Ford's demands to cut up to 10,000 teacher jobs and significantly increase class sizes. The unions in British Columbia and Ontario have kept the teachers' fights hermetically sealed, one from the other, even as assaults on education and teachers' living standards has become the norm across North America.

Placentia, Newfoundland municipal workers in seventh week of strike

Fifteen clerical staff, arena attendants, maintenance operators, laborers and municipal enforcement officers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have entered their seventh week on strike. Mayor Bernie Power, himself a member of the province's public sector union, NAPE, stated that the town does not want to see "big raises" anymore. The union has submitted an offer for no wage increase in the first two years of a four-year contract with 2 percent rises in the third and fourth years of the proposed deal. Factoring in inflation—which is always higher than the average in Newfoundland—means an actual wage cut in real terms over the life of the contract. The mayor has rejected the proposal as too rich for the town.



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