

## Public employees union blocks strike by 55,000 Ontario education workers

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 October 2019

### Strike at Ontario schools averted with last-minute deal

A strike by 55,000 education workers across the province of Ontario was called off Sunday night just hours before a strike deadline following weekend-long talks between the province and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

The deal undercuts Ontario teachers, whose negotiations are under way. The government is seeking an increase in class sizes, threatening some 10,000 teaching positions.

Although details of the proposed agreement with education workers have not been released, key sticking points in negotiations centered on sick-leave and absenteeism, with the union citing workplace violence as a primary cause for lost work days. The workers affected include office administrators, education assistants and custodians.

Press reports claim that the Government of Ontario Premier Doug Ford had put another C\$100 million on the table, fearful of the consequences of a walkout impacting some 2 million students in the midst of the federal election campaign, with voting set for October 21.

More than 20 school boards across the province, including the largest in Toronto, were braced for the strike last week, with many preparing to cancel classes for Monday. The deal, which follows a work-to-rule campaign last week, is subject to ratification votes throughout the week.

### Strike action at Quebec seniors' residence

After working without a contract since April of this year, over 110 workers at the Monastère d'Aylmer seniors' residence in Aylmer, Quebec, across the river from Ottawa, went on limited strike last week following a near-unanimous vote for strike action.

The residence is owned by the largest operator of its kind in Canada, Chartwell Group, and negotiators for the Teamsters union, which is bargaining for striking workers, say they are seeking improvements in working conditions in a new contract to bring them in line with their counterparts at other facilities.

While the union has said that they would normally not want to disrupt services during a job action, they say that the company has forced them to take strike action for limited periods during work shifts.

### Latin America

### Trinidadian teachers protest over salary negotiations

Teachers in Trinidad marched to the Brian Lara Promenade in Port-of-Spain on October 1 to demand that Trinidad and Tobago's chief personnel officer (CPO) restart negotiations with the T&T Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA) to improve their salaries. Participation in the mobilization varied across school districts.

The stalled negotiations concern 2014 to 2017. After the CPO had made its proposal in 2014, TTUTA submitted a counterproposal in 2015. According to a *Newsday* report, "Since 2015, TTUTA has made several unsuccessful attempts to get the CPO to begin discussions."

At the rally following the march, TTUTA bureaucrats responded with bluster, denouncing the disrespect and neglect shown by the Ministry of Education and the CPO and calling on teachers to "take matters into their own hands" and "get ready for battle even more." However, the minister of education told reporters that TTUTA President Lysley Doodhai had said that the teachers would make up any class time lost to the protest. *Newsday* reported that "TTUTA's general council is expected to hold an emergency meeting next Wednesday to discuss the membership's next protest."

### Trinidadian waste management workers protest dismissals of daily paid co-workers

Workers for the Trinidad & Tobago Solid Waste Management Company Limited (SWMCOL) demonstrated outside the company's Port-of-Spain headquarters October 3 to protest the dismissal two days before of 21 daily paid workers in the recycling division. The workers' union, the Industrial General and Sanitation Workers Union (IGSWU), called the protest.

Protesters accused the firm of abusing women, since the majority of the dismissed workers are single mothers. Most of them, according to IGSWU President Robert Benacia, had been working for seven or eight months and were in line for permanent status when they received their dismissal letters. He added that the SWMCOL was trying to rotate workers so that it could maintain a low-paid, short-term pool of workers.

The SWMCOL claims that the workers had voluntarily signed an agreement to work under contract for a specific temporary project. It also claims that its intentions are altruistic; it wants to spread the benefits of employment around to others. The union claims that any terms and conditions for day laborers have to be discussed with the union, and the SWMCOL is thus violating the contract, and that after 90 days, the company has to change the workers' status to permanent.

Stalled wage negotiations are another issue. According to a guardian.co.tt report, "To date, the IGSWU is still awaiting counter proposals before moving forward regarding the period 2014 to 2016."

### **Colombian judicial workers strike for 48 hours over workloads, budget**

Members of 13 Colombian judicial workers' unions struck on October 3 and 4 to demand that the national government take measures to alleviate the congestion in the nation's court system. Dozens of cities nationwide witnessed strikes by tens of thousands of judicial workers.

There are more than 55,000 judicial workers in the Colombian legal system, but according to the Asonal Judicial union, there is a need for at least 3,000 more to deal with the growing number of cases. The overload has caused problems of low morale, extensive delays and missed deadlines. A recent addition of 115 billion pesos (US\$33 million) into the 2020 budget was described by the Judicial Branch Syndical Coordinator federation as "not sufficient, because this represents about 20 percent of what is really required."

In addition, judicial workers cite arbitrary transfers, harassment if they complain of their working conditions, and lack of willingness by the national government to respond to their demands. The unions have said that if their concerns are not addressed, the judicial workers will go on indefinite strike at the end of 2019 or beginning of 2020.

## **United States**

### **Murphysboro, Illinois, teachers launch strike over wages**

Teachers and support staff for the Murphysboro, Illinois, school district went on strike October 3 after rejecting the district's most recent offer. The 152 members of the Murphysboro Education Association (MEA) are demanding 3.7 percent annual wage hikes over a three-year contract as opposed to the school board's offer of 2.28 percent per year. The walkout is the first in the district in three decades.

District Superintendent Chris Grode has alleged that the two sides are \$1.5 million apart and that the board's offer has reached a threshold after which the district will slide into deficit. But the MEA says that the difference in wage offers is more accurately \$385,000.

The union, which includes counselors, nurses and social workers, has accused the board of padding its budget numbers. Catlin Langellier, the MEA lead negotiator, told the *Southern Illinoisan*, "A budget is a guess and they are, year after year, creating a fictional

deficit by claiming things cost more than they actually do. Then, at the end of the year, they have all this money." In the previous year, the board claimed a deficit but actually emerged half-a-million dollars in the black.

Meanwhile, the Illinois state government is preparing budget cuts and a possible freeze on property taxes that will constrict state school districts from raising revenues.

### **Federal labor board hints at crackdown on wildcat strikes**

*Bloomberg Law* reported that a recent decision by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) indicates the federal labor court is preparing to curb wildcat strikes. In a case involving the 2008 firing of 86 Puerto Rican Coca-Cola workers who took wildcat action, a footnote in the decision called into question an earlier NLRB decision that determined an earlier 1998 wildcat strike was lawful. *Bloomberg* stated, "The Republican members of the NLRB have taken to using footnotes to give cues about which existing policies and precedents they will change."

In the 2008 case, the Puerto Rican workers defied the Teamsters union and went on wildcat strike. Coca-Cola management issued a letter to the union demanding the "illegal" strike be stopped. The Teamsters bureaucracy responded that it did not authorize the strike and charged it was led by "false leaders." The company copied the letter and distributed it to striking workers, who continued the strike. Coca-Cola followed up with suspensions and the firing of the 86 workers.

In 2015, a lower court ruled in favor of the workers' right to conduct a wildcat strike. But the most recent decision challenged the 2015 ruling and sent it back to the lower court. The new decision stated that the wildcat strike "undermined" the Teamsters union officials' negotiating positions and their right to act as the exclusive representative of the workers. *Bloomberg* commented, "Although the National Labor Relations Board's authority applies only in the private sector, new precedent or rulemaking that curtails union members' ability to hold a lawful wildcat strike could have significant impact, given the recent and major uptick in labor disputes across the country. The nationwide wave of work stoppages that began in 2018, for example, included a number of wildcat strikes because some happened in states where it's illegal for public school teachers to strike."



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