

Workers Struggles: the Americas

13 February 2018

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The United States

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The St. Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT) said it reached a tentative agreement Sunday night with local school officials and called off a strike originally set for Tuesday.

The deal covers 3,700 teachers, education assistants and school and community professionals. Details have not been released. The tentative settlement must still be reviewed by the SPFT executive board. If the board approves the contract it will go to the membership for a vote.

St. Paul teachers voted by an 85 percent margin to authorize a strike on January 31. The district has been slashing funding for schools for the last three years; it faced a \$27.3 million deficit for 2017-2018. The main points of dispute were wages, classroom sizes, staffing levels and other issues.

Teachers have expressed anger over large class sizes, which were as big as 37 students per class for high schools in 2016. The union had been asking for a meager 2.5 percent pay increase and a two student reduction in class sizes, demands the district refused.

Contract workers at Boston airport launch unlimited strike for unionization

Hundreds of contract workers for JetBlue Airways at Boston's Logan Airport began walking off the job starting February 7 in an effort to press for unionization and improved living standards. The Service Employees International Union contends that ultimately some 500 contract workers for ReadyJet Inc., Flight Services & Systems and other contractors will be on an unlimited strike after struggling for six years to organize a union.

One striker, Sonia Ramirez, told the *Boston Globe*, that the strike would come at a cost, "Yes, it's affecting me and my family, but it's for the greater good. We're in this fight because we want better wages and health benefits."

JetBlue is Logan Airport's largest airline. But the few hundred striking workers are a fraction of the 2,500 low-paid contract workers at the airport.

The SEIU arranged the strike to come in the wake of a meeting of the Boston City Council where a phony resolution was passed in an attempt to create the illusion they were behind the workers. Democratic Mayor Martin Walsh has also postured in support of the workers.

Latin America

The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Colombian teachers announce one-day strike over government noncompliance with contract

The Colombian Education Workers Federation (Fecode) announced February 7 that it has called a 24-hour strike for the 21st. Fecode accuses the government of not complying with an agreement reached in mid-June 2017 following a 37-day strike.

That strike finally ended when the government agreed to address the issues affecting Fecode's 350,000 teachers—among them school maintenance, supplies, student meals and salaries. However, a recent Fecode communiqué claims, "The government has been issuing decrees without consulting the teaching profession. Thus, the new norms are generating chaos in educational institutions," and the result has been "labor instability for educators, overcrowding in classrooms, late workdays."

Other complaints concern the inconvenience of the health care system—called "calamitous" by Fecode—bonuses and infrastructure.

Guyanese retrenched sugar workers protest lack of severance pay

A high-level ministerial meeting in Enmore, East Coast Demerara (ECD), Guyana was met with scores of protesters February 7. The workers carried placards and chanted to demand severance pay promised them when the sugar plantation where they worked was closed.

The retrenched workers and their families lined the street leading to the meeting to demand that they be paid according to the law. The protesters voiced their objection to the presence of Public Security Minister Khemraj Ramjattan, who they believe broke promises to sugar workers.

Many of the workers have only received part of the severance package and it has been extremely difficult to find employment in a region formerly dominated by the now defunct sugar plantation. A citizensreportgy.com article put it bluntly: “Their pleas of desperation fell on deaf ears as government remained resolute in giving some workers only half of their severance even though they were entitled to full severance since December last.”

Business Minister Dominic Gaskin told the protesters that they would get their severance pay on February 11, but that those who were owed over 500,000 Guyanese dollars (US\$2,400) would receive half their pay. The article noted, “It is still unclear when the remaining balance will be paid out,” but that recently Agriculture Minister Noel Holder “only assured that it will be paid before the end of 2018.”

One-day strike by bank workers in Argentina over pay raise

Employees of Argentina’s private and public banks struck for 24 hours February 9 following the failure of parity talks. A statement by the Bank Employees Association (AB) called the stoppage “overwhelming” with over 96 percent adherence.

In the parity negotiations, bank representatives offered a raise of nine percent for 2018; AB pointed out that inflation is expected to be at least 15 percent this year. In addition, the banks are pushing for changes in the bank workers’ pension system.

The banks close during Carnival festivities February 12 and 13, but are scheduled to reopen on February 14, with the bank employees returning to work. AB has called for a 48-hour walkout on February 19 and 20 if there is no improvement in management’s stance.

Argentine social security agency workers strike for reinstatement of fired coworkers

Workers for Argentina’s National Social Security Administration (ANSES) in Mar del Plata began a strike February 5 to demand the reinstatement of 82 workers at the national level, including five in the coastal resort city.

The Social Benefits Organisms Personnel Association (APOPS) has resolved to continue the strike after Carnival (February 12 and 13). On the 14th, the strike will remain in force as APOPS holds assemblies to decide on the next course of action.

Canada

Quebec doctors threaten job action

About 3,600 medical residents in Quebec have delivered a powerful strike mandate to four university associations after working without a contract since March of 2015.

A spokesperson for the Fédération des médecins résidents du Québec (FMRQ) that represents residents has said that they favor increasing pressure on the government through various tactics ahead of any strike action. The main issues cited in the dispute are long working hours and low wages, with many residents working over 70 hours a week for what barely amounts to minimum wage.

Essential service legislation dictates that no more than 10 per-cent of residents can be on strike at any given time so that any job action would have a limited impact. The government has refused FMRQ demands for pay raises and no talks are currently scheduled.

B.C. casino workers set to strike

Workers at the River Rock Casino in Richmond, B.C. voted nearly unanimously to go on strike last week under the British Columbia Government and Service Employees Union (BCGEU) who are negotiating with Great Canadian Gaming Corporation, which owns the casino.

Great Canadian reportedly responded to a request for wage increases from the union last year with a proposal to cut wages even further. The 400 plus workers affected include food service, dealers and other casino workers who have been fighting more than a year for a new contract. Workers are also fighting for improvements in health insurance, which has been cut despite increasing company profits.

This comes as another 400 workers at the Hard Rock casino in nearby Coquitlam, B.C. voted to strike after reaching an impasse in first-contract negotiations that have been ongoing for over a year.

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