

Workers struggles: The Americas

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United States

Minnesota teachers' strike ends

The eight-week strike by 86 teachers in Crosby-Ironton, Minnesota ended April 6 after an agreement on the main issue of health insurance for retirees was reached. Under the old agreement, the school district paid 100 percent of health insurance premiums from about age 56 until the teacher was eligible for Medicare. With 65 teachers soon to be retiring, the district moved to end the program.

The new contract sets up a trust fund that will provide help for payment of health insurance premiums for high-seniority teachers. But new hires won't be eligible for the benefit, and lower-seniority teachers will receive a more limited benefit.

The strike became very bitter as the school board moved to hire replacement teachers during the course of the strike. Two days before the settlement, the school board voted to axe the jobs of 30 teachers under the pretext of falling enrollment. The contract did not address the layoffs, which are to be dealt with by the board this summer.

Strike ends at New York plastics plant

Workers at Innovative Plastics in Orangeburg, New York, ended a two-day strike and returned to work April 7 after ratifying a new three-year contract. The strike came after months of negotiations that produced an agreement calling for a 135 percent increase in weekly medical costs for the plant's 111 workers.

The new agreement implements the increases in medical premiums, resulting in weekly payments between \$19.50 and \$45.95. The company's concession was to provide supplemental wage increases that will offset the increase in medical premiums for particular workers. Wages at the plant ranged from \$9 an hour to \$15 an hour under the old agreement. The

contract also provides increases to pensions and improvements in the dental plan.

Union organizers sue union in overtime dispute

Fourteen former and current union organizers for the United Food and Commercial Workers Local (UFCW) Local 7, based in Denver, Colorado, sued their union for failure to pay overtime. The organizers were compelled by the union to put in 70-hour weeks, but were paid a bonus in lieu of overtime pay.

Plaintiff attorney Todd McNamara said workers were forced to file the suit after discussions with UFCW officials failed to produce results. "We don't get it," said McNamara. "You are out there trying to organize Wal-Mart workers, yet you aren't paying your own employees what they are lawfully entitled to."

The suit states that the UFCW misclassified organizers as exempt from state and federal overtime rules. Colorado law requires companies to pay most non-management employees at a rate 1-1/2 times hourly pay. The complaint also says, "Because a climate of fear and retaliation exists at UFCE Local 7, present employees are hesitant to pursue their legitimate claims for overtime."

Canada

Toronto Zoo workers threatened with lockout

Employees of Toronto Zoo could strike on April 25, after the zoo management negotiators asked the Ministry of Labor conciliator to file a "no board" report on April 5, which triggers a strike/lockout deadline. The workers, represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1600, are concerned that this move may indicate that the zoo management intends to lock them out, as it did during the last round of negotiations. According to CUPE, the management refused to participate in the conciliation stage and requested the deadline as soon as the conciliator arrived.

CUPE represents about 170 permanent and 200 seasonal and casual employees of Toronto Zoo, many

of whom earn only C\$9 an hour.

Liquor board union appeals to government

Fifty-five hundred employees of Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) have asked the Ontario Ministry of Labor to appoint a conciliator in their labor dispute, as required by law before they can strike. Their last contract expired on March 31, and on April 7 they voted 93 percent in favor of strike if necessary.

The main issue is job security: the workers are concerned that the government is planning to privatize the LCBO. Before the last provincial elections, the Liberal representative Dalton McGuinty promised there would be no increase in the number of private franchise liquor stores. After the Liberals were elected, that number increased from 50 to more than 120. LCBO previously claimed that it would not close any stores as a result of allowing franchise stores, but now it wants that letter deleted from the agreement, as well as a no-layoff provision.

The workers are represented by their own union, Ontario Liquor Board Employees' Union (OLBEU).



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