

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## **Thousands of peasants march on Bolivia's Santa Cruz province**

On Friday, thousands of peasants began to march in Santa Cruz, in Bolivia's eastern "crescent region," in support of President Evo Morales. The protesters are demanding that the government return public institutions taken over in the departments of Beni, Pando, Santa Cruz, and Tarija. According to reports, protesters blocked routes linking Santa Cruz with Argentina, Chile, Peru and Brazil.

## **Bank employees protest in Argentina**

Bank employees went on a 24-hour strike and protested in the city of Tucuman in northwest Argentina. The employees are demanding a wage increase of 1,000 pesos (US\$300). The banking employees rallied in Tucuman's financial center, forcing area banks to close.

The strikers insist on a wage increase to overcome the effects of Argentina's inflation—expected to be more than 30 percent this year.

A group of retirees staged a counter-protest, complaining that striking bank workers had promised them they could collect their checks but they had been turned away. A striking worker told reporters, "Management did not want to open the gates so that we could make those payments. It was their fault. We had people inside ready to process the checks."

## **Peru: Public health workers on their sixth day of the strike**

Saturday marked the sixth day on a strike by public health doctors in Peru. The strike shows no signs of solution, and doctors have threatened to completely abandon emergency services in three hospitals unless the government addresses their demands. The doctors, who demand better salaries and a higher budget for public health, refuse to comply with the government's request that they suspend the strike before negotiations

begin.

The government of President Alan Garcia declared the strike illegal and is threatening criminal prosecution against doctors who abandon their posts. However, Julio Vargas, president of the Peruvian Medical Federation (FMP), expressed his optimism that the government would negotiate with the striking doctors. The FMP indicated that 20,000 doctors have obeyed the strike. In addition, since Wednesday, workers and technicians of the Social Security Medical Insurance Fund (ESSALUD) have joined the strike.

The doctors are demanding the resignation of Health Minister Hernan Carrido Lecca and that the government honor a contract that the health minister signed last January. They have refused mediation by the Catholic Church. Julio Vargas said Peru's public health budget, which amounts to US\$800 million, 4 percent of the country's GDP, "is one of the lowest in the whole world."

## **Judicial clerks' strike continues in Colombia**

The strike by 40,000 court employees over wages continues in Colombia after the union that represents the striking workers decided not to call off the strike that began 17 days ago. Union leader Fabio Hernandez denounced the proposed raise of 66,000 million pesos (US\$31.4 million) over two years, calling it unacceptable. The strikers are demanding a 70 percent raise for the clerks and that the salaries of judges and district attorneys be doubled.

## **Northern Virginia bus strike cripples commuter transit**

About 150 drivers struck the commuter bus service company Veolia Transportation in Fairfax County, Virginia, September 15 over pensions, wages and healthcare coverage. The weeklong work stoppage affected some 20,000 commuters who shuttle across southern Fairfax County just west of Washington, D.C.

No serious negotiations have taken place since the strike broke out, although federal mediators have met

with the company and Local 3001 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which represents the drivers.

The strike comes as the county accepts bids for a new bus management contract that will expand the Fairfax Connector service and could be worth \$200-\$300 million, according to a Local 3001 official.

### **Striking Pennsylvania teachers, school board deadlocked over contract**

Negotiators for the Saucon Valley School District of Northampton County, Pennsylvania, rejected a proposal by striking teachers September 18 and indicated they would not alter their last offer. Members of the Saucon Valley Education Association walked out on strike at the beginning of last week after a weekend bargaining session failed to resolve salary and health benefit differences.

The 180 striking teachers have reduced their wage demands from 6.5 percent annual salary increase to 5.5 percent while the school board has maintained its offer of 4 percent. The strike affects some 2,400 students. According to Pennsylvania state law, teachers must return to classrooms by September 24.

### **Illinois teachers vote to end strike**

The 500 members of the Huntley Education Association voted to accept a tentative three-year contract September 18 with School District 158 in the region just northwest of Chicago. Teachers first struck four days earlier, demanding annual 7.4 percent salary increases as opposed to the board's offer of 5.9 percent.

The latest proposal lowers these figures to annual increases of 4 to 5.25 percent in the first year followed by 5.25 percent and 4 percent in years two and three, amounts that do not keep pace with inflation. The district's school board is scheduled to vote on the new pact at its meeting September 22.

### **University of Windsor faculty on strike**

One thousand forty-five full and part-time faculty and staff at the University of Windsor in southern Ontario went on strike September 17 after talks broke down between the Windsor University Faculty Association representing the strikers and school negotiators.

In addition to wages, some of the main obstacles in the dispute include working conditions and the designation of research-only positions for professors. A rally of more than 1,000, involving students and

academics from across the country, was held last Friday in a show of solidarity for the strike.

The previous contract expired June 30, and this is the first strike by this union in the 26 years since it won the right to strike.

### **Bus strike looms in Toronto region**

A strike by bus drivers serving commuters in York region north of Toronto, Ontario, is set to begin Monday morning if last-ditch efforts to reach a deal are not successful.

One hundred sixty-four drivers employed by Viva and Veolia Transport, represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), operate one third of the York Region's transit service, but the remaining routes would continue operating in the event of a strike. In addition to a 3 percent increase in each year of a three-year contract, the union is seeking improvements in sick time and scheduling provisions. The union, which also represents drivers in Toronto, says drivers in the York region are among the worst paid in the area, receiving nearly 20 percent less than their counterparts in the city of Toronto.



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