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Guatemala: Summary Of Teachers' Strike

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On June 5, over 40,000 public school teachers went on strike after exhausting all legal recourse in attempts to obtain a salary hike of 200 quetzales per month (US\$74.07). Strike leaders point out that President Vinicio Cerezo pledged to implement an increase for teachers in 1989 in a letter dated Jan. 28, 1988. Teachers are also demanding improved working conditions and observance of legislation governing teachers' employment, duties and responsibilities (Decree 1485). About 35,000 additional public employees have joined the strike. Recently, 31 public employees, including 15 teachers, commenced a hunger strike. Strikers have peacefully occupied streets and public buildings in Guatemala City and other departmental capitals. Hundreds of strikers from throughout Guatemala have participated in street demonstrations in the capital. Strikers also managed to virtually close the country's borders for a few days via occupations of customs and immigration offices. President Cerezo has rejected the possibility of a salary hike before 1990. Teachers and other strikers have been targeted with threats, mass dismissals, arbitrary arrests, and attacks by anti-riot police. Government officials have attempted to turn parents' sympathies against the strikers, and have authorized new contracts to replace teachers on strike. According to Cerezo, the teachers' movement is "financed by groups from the extreme right and led by radicals of the extreme left." A primary school teacher's basic monthly salary is 340 quetzals (US\$126). In 1989, consumer prices have increased at three times the rate of wage hikes. A subsistence wage for an average Guatemalan household is calculated at 18 quetzals per day, or 540 quetzals (US\$200) per month. (Note: President Cerezo's declared monthly income, including salary and expenses, is 55,000 quetzals, or US\$20,370.) [Basic data from 08/04/89 report by Comision de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala, Mexico, summarized by Guatemalan Human Rights Commission/USA, Washington, DC.]

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