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Guatemala Labor Conflicts: Summary Of Recent Events & Statements

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July 17: Striking public employees rejected a government offer of wage hikes ranging from 18% to 22% and threatened to launch a nation-wide general strike (See CAU, 07/17/92 for previous coverage.) Armando Sanchez, secretary general of the National Federation of Public Employees (FENASTEG), said the strikers would like to present President Jorge Serrano's administration with a counter-proposal, but that negotiations had reached a "dead end." The government commission set up to negotiate with striking workers, headed by Labor Minister Mario Solorzano and Finance Minister Richard Aitkenhead, announced that it was suspending negotiations. Government spokesperson Gonzalo Asturias indicated that the administration is considering the possibility of unilaterally imposing its proposed wage hikes and firing all public employees who continue to participate in strike activities. An estimated 15,000 public and private sector employees participated in a peaceful march through the streets of Guatemala City. July 18: Spokespersons from FENASTEG and from the National Federation of Public Service Workers (FENASEP) said they would accept a 60% wage hike, down from their original demand of 83%. Following a union meeting to discuss strategy, FENASTEG's Sanchez declared that "the struggle will be intensified" with "stronger actions." July 20: President Serrano said the demands put forth by strikers were "unjust" and threatened to draw up a list of all workers participating in the labor action. He said the government's wage hike offer remained in effect and reiterated that the offer was non-negotiable. Sanchez called for a continuation of work stoppages around the country. He added that FENASTEG had reduced its wage hike demand to 40% "in order to demonstrate our willingness to negotiate." July 21: Strike leaders threatened to take more drastic actions, such as blocking roads and obstructing transportation to isolate the capital from the rest of the country, if their salary demands were not met. Later in the day, groups of striking workers disrupted traffic in various parts of Guatemala City. The government sent in troops to reinforce some 15,000 police personnel already deployed in the capital. No incidents of violence were reported. Authorities ordered public office buildings closed in order to prevent strikers from using the buildings as a meeting place. President Serrano left for Spain to participate in the summit meeting of Ibero-American heads of state. Representatives of about 15,000 striking teachers announced acceptance of the government's wage offer and the end of their participation in the labor actions. An estimated 170,000 other public employees continued strike actions. In the late afternoon, the government filed four petitions with labor courts in the capital to declare "illegal" the strikes in different branches of the Ministry of Communications, Transportation and Public Works, among them, the postal service, civil aeronautics, and highway services. Meanwhile, government representatives reopened negotiations with strike leaders. In the early evening, strike leaders told reporters that workers had accepted the original government offer of wage hikes of between 18% and 22%, and that the unions had signed an agreement to this effect with the government, effectively ending the strike. Armando Sanchez said the wage hikes were insufficient, but that workers were forced to accept the offer due to threats to "destroy the trade union movement." In addition to the wage hikes, workers secured commitments from the government to pay monthly bonuses calculated on the basis of the length of employment, as well as

to index salaries to the rate of inflation. (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 07/17/92, 07/18/92, 07/20/92, 07/21/92; Agencia Centroamericana de Noticias-Spanish news service EFE, 07/17/92, 07/18/92, 07/20-22/92)

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