

Puerto Rico's public-sector workers demand higher wages

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People march through the streets of Old San Juan during a teachers' protest
A teachers' strike in Puerto Rico last week led the government to tap federal funds to give them a temporary \$1,000-a-month raise starting July 1 [File: Ricardo Arduengo/Reuters]

San Juan, February 9 (RHC)-- Puerto Rico is bracing for a second day of protests Thursday as public-sector workers said they will continue to fight for higher wages and more pension guarantees as the U.S. commonwealth struggles to balance the demands of a historic bankruptcy against growing discontent.

On Wednesday, several thousand people — including teachers, firefighters and labor unions — marched to the governor's mansion in the heart of the Old San Juan tourist district, waving signs and banging pots and pans in one of the largest displays of discontent in more than a year.

The move comes amid soaring consumer prices, including a sharp spike in the cost of housing. A teachers' strike last week led the government to tap federal funds to give them a temporary \$1,000-a-month raise starting July 1st.

On Wednesday, Finance Secretary Francisco Pares Alicea suggested more wage hikes are in the works. "Teachers are expecting a salary increase and that's what they will see in their bank accounts," he wrote on Twitter. "We will also do the same for a significant portion of the public sector, including my colleagues in the Treasury."

On an island that has been in the doldrums for a decade, public jobs are a lifeline, representing about 23% of all formal non-farm employment, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. A federally appointed oversight board, shepherding the island out of a historic bankruptcy, has repeatedly said the government needs to identify savings or implement tax hikes to cover wage increases. It has also called for deep reform of the public sector, which it says is "providing declining levels of service at a high cost to residents."

Some public workers are already set for an increase under the latest board-certified fiscal plan, including a 15% increase for correctional officers and a \$1,500 raise for firefighters. But protest groups are pushing for broader raises. And many were angered when Governor Pedro Pierluisi this week suggested that public workers who weren't satisfied with their salaries should consider new jobs.

In August 2019, then-Governor Ricardo Rossello stepped down after massive protests broke out after the contents of a crass and insensitive chat group he was involved in were leaked.

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