

# *Teachers Launch Massive Protests in Colombia*

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Bogota, April 29 (teleSUR-RHC)-- Thousands of teachers took to the streets in cities across the country on Monday to demand salary increases, access to adequate health care and the elimination of examinations used to evaluate teachers.

The strike was organized by Colombian teachers union Fecode. Its vice president Luis Eduardo Varela explained that one of the main motives behind the industrial action was an unfulfilled promise made by Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos a year ago.

"A year ago, Santos promised to increase our salaries, because since 2001 we have lost over 20 percent of our purchasing power. He was re-elected, there is a new minister, but the promise remains unfulfilled."

Strikes, which began last week, were prompted after union representatives failed to reach an agreement in salary negotiations with Education Minister Gina Parody. Parody claims that the average teacher's salary now stands at 2.3 million Colombian pesos (\$928) a month and offered Fecode an across-the-board 10 percent salary increase this year. But Fecode claims that the average salary is just 1.5 million Colombian pesos a month and is demanding a salary increase of at least 20 percent.

According to local press reports, Monday's largest protest was held in Bogota, where some 22,000 protesters took part in a march down the central Calle 26. In response to Monday's protests, President

Santos called on the teachers' union to end strike, saying that the education minister is open to dialogue.

"What I insistently ask is that children not be affected. They should not be paying the price of these protests. I repeat, this government dialogues and respects protests. We are more than willing to dialogue, as we have been doing before," Santos said.

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