

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## **Colombia: Agreement reached to end Bogotá transit strike**

A four-day strike by small bus owners was ended March 5 when they reached a deal with Bogotá authorities. The protest, which had taken 164,00 buses off the streets, “led to traffic chaos and heavy business losses and left 300 people arrested for public disturbances,” according to an EFE news service report.

The disturbances included attacks on government vehicles covering the struck routes, looting and disorderly conduct. In the La Gaitana neighborhood, 300 youths destroyed a police station. According to EFE, “several people were injured in the clashes, including a six-month-old baby who was harmed by the tear gas authorities used to disperse the demonstrators.”

Business fell by around 60 percent during the strike and classes were canceled at public schools.

The small bus owners’ association, Apetrans, had protested one aspect of the proposed Integrated Public Transport System (SITP), which city government figures claim would alleviate transportation and pollution problems in Bogotá. The city would have given the bus drivers a fixed monthly income of 0.8 percent of the value of their vehicles to compensate for the expense of integrating into the new system, which would require acquisition of newer, less polluting vehicles. The bus owners had originally demanded 5 percent, then gradually lowered their demand to 1.7 percent. Under the agreement, they will receive 1.5 percent.

## **Bolivia: Evo Morales government claims victory over**

## **public transit drivers**

Ministers of the government of Evo Morales claimed victory over a 48-hour strike called by the country’s biggest public transit workers union. In a press conference Thursday, Interior Department Minister Sacha Llorenti and Public Works and Services Minister Walter Delgadillo said that the 150,000-member union’s strike was “defeated” and “spent.”

The union’s principal director, Franklin Duran, said that a hunger strike involving about 10 directors in the union against Morales’ “dry law” decree—which would not only punish drivers caught drunk on the job, but would confiscate their vehicles—would continue.

On Wednesday, confrontations between demonstrators and police in La Paz, Cochabamba and other locales resulted in 20 arrests. The protestors were demanding the release of 63 previously arrested transit workers.

## **Argentina: Doctors call 24-hour work stoppage**

On Wednesday, March 3, public health center doctors in several Argentine provinces called for a one-day work stoppage in solidarity with their counterparts in Santiago del Estero, who have been in a six-month conflict over salaries and working conditions.

Members of Fespora (the Federation of Health Professionals of the Argentine Republic) called for the stoppage in Buenos Aires’ 77 hospitals as well as in Chaco, Catamarca, Santa Fe and Santiago del Estero, according to a March 3 *Página/12* report.

Hospitals and medical centers in other areas conducted work stoppages of from one to six hours.

Fespora decried the fact that of 8,000 public health workers, 5,600 face being consigned to temporary work,

with 4,000 nurses, drivers, administrators and technicians earning 660 pesos (US\$171) a month. In addition, the work stoppage is a response to the police presence in the Hospital Regional Ramón Carrillo in Santiago del Estero.

*Página/12* quoted union official Jorge Yablowski, who denounced the presence at the hospital of two hundred police, who “occupy the hospital by force and tore down all the posters that proclaim the total stoppage one month ago. Armed, they threaten the employees so that they’ll abandon the strike.”

### **Bus drivers locked out at the University of Alabama campus**

Campus bus drivers at the University of Alabama were locked out March 3, two days after about 60 drivers called a one-day strike against the British-based First Transit Corporation. The workers, members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1208, are fighting to better their current wages of \$9.50 an hour, some \$4 an hour less than the wages paid other drivers in the region, and want improved health care coverage.

University students have rallied and distributed leaflets in support of the drivers. When the university brought in replacement drivers last week, workers turned back one bus and convinced other potential strikebreakers to join their picket lines.

Through a Freedom of Information Act request, workers discovered that the University of Alabama pays First Transit \$55 an hour for drivers, resulting in a \$200 million profit for the corporation during the first half of last year.

### **Latest death at Virginia ports highlights sequence of safety violations**

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) levied a \$7,000 fine against the Virginia International Terminal (VIT) in the wake of the December 22 death of a dock foreman. The fine has brought to light a raft of violations by VIT, a private contractor that operates Virginia’s terminals for the Port Authority.

The accident occurred when a worker operating a crane

crashed it into a 105-foot light pole that in turn fell on 43-year-old David Weiland, killing him. OSHA revealed the crane operator had been involved in four previous accidents. Weiland is the sixth worker to die since 2005 under VIT’s operation of Virginia’s terminals.

The most recent citation against VIT is the 17<sup>th</sup> in the past five years, 11 of which have been deemed “serious” where “serious” connotes “substantial probability that death or serious physical harm could result and where the employer knew, or should have known, of the hazard.”

The Virginia Port Authority Police have also filed a misdemeanor charge against the crane operator that carries the possibility of a fine as high as \$2,500 and a maximum 12-month jail term.

### **Nova Scotia hospital workers vote to strike**

Hospital laundry workers in Halifax, Nova Scotia, voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action last week over a range of issues, including wages, shift premiums, benefits and the lack of a pension plan.

Although their union, the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU/NUPGE), has said they are making preparations for strike action, including training picket captains, they emphasize that they hope a strike can be avoided. Talks are scheduled to go to conciliation later this month.



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