

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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*The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.*

## Argentine flight attendants return to work after one-day strike

Flight attendants and cabin crew personnel for the Argentine LAN airline returned to work on December 22 at two airports after a one-day strike. The stoppage, begun at 4:30 a.m. on December 21, was the result of the expiration of a binding arbitration meeting called by the Ministry of Labor after a strike November 8.

The original strike action at the Jorge Newbery and Ezeiza international airports was called over company violations of work rules regarding maximum hours and new hires, as well as a raise negotiated between the flight attendants' union ATCPEA and LAN. Rank-and-file members of ATCPEA considered the raise to be illegal.

The workers continued their protest in the face of threats by the authorities. About 30 flights were canceled as strikers demonstrated, blocked ticket booths and counters and carried signs. At first, the union said it would not deal with the ministry, but wanted to deal directly with company executives.

Eventually, union negotiators went back to the table in an emergency meeting with labor minister Carlos Tomada at 11:00 p.m., emerging with an agreement at 4:00 the next morning.

## Brazilian airline workers call off strike

After two months of negotiations, unions representing airline pilots, flight attendants and other commercial aviation workers threatened to strike on December 23, but backed down after the Superior Labor Tribunal (TST) threatened severe penalties.

A statement issued December 21 by the SNA ground employees union demanded raises that are above the inflation rate and are in line with profits that the Brazilian airlines have garnered, profits described by the statement as "spectacular." The workers demanded a raise of 15 percent, while the last offer by the airlines was 8 percent.

The strike was planned to begin at 6:00 a.m. and would have affected more than 500,000 passengers.

"Magistrate Milton de Moura Franca, president of TST, invoked constitutional principles of freedom of movement and a 'free and just society' and warned that the unions should maintain at least 80 percent of service, under risk of receiving fines of [US\$15,000] a day," reported Terra. In addition, on Thursday afternoon, federal judge Itagiba Catta Preta Neto raised the fine to [US\$503,500] a day and forbade the union from striking until January 10, after the holiday period.

SNA president Gelson Dagmar Fochesato told the press, "The strike is

suspended. Passengers will not be harmed during the festivities. In January, we will evaluate the situation and we will see if we will carry out a strike."

## Bolivian workers denounce nonpayment of end-of-year bonuses

Bolivia's Labor Department Headquarters received complaints against 57 enterprises that have not paid end-of-year bonuses as of Friday, December 24, among them the Misticuni Hydroelectric Consortium, which paid the benefit and wages for November that same day.

According to a *Los Tiempos* report, "Of the more than 4,000 enterprises legally registered in the department only 1,900 presented their payment schedules for the end-of-year benefit." Department official Maria Lourdes Bustamante told the daily that the complaints would be investigated and the companies would be ordered to pay the bonus.

Among the businesses that cause the most complaints are construction companies and clothing makers. Bustamante said that some enterprises have weakened the rights of workers for five years and that the owners must present their payment plans to verify the complaints.

It was only after the workers at Misticuni carried out a series of demonstrations, protests and vigils at the company headquarters in Cochabamba and filed the complaints that the firm relented and paid the back pay and bonus. At one point, workers blockaded the street leading to the entrance of EM (Empresa Misticuni) with trash containers and shouted "Misticuni is garbage!" "We want to get paid!" and "We don't have anything to eat!"

Misticuni has suspended two projects, a tunnel and a dam, but promises that work will begin anew on January 3.

## Guyana: Public service union issues ultimatum to government to restart talks

Giving the government a one-month ultimatum to restart stalled wage negotiations, the Guyana Public Service Union (GPSU) denounced the unilateral imposition of a 5 percent increase in early December and "has not ruled out strike action," according to a *Caribbean News Now!* report.

In a statement to *Kaieteur News*, GPSU President Patrick Yarde noted that the government has arbitrarily announced raises instead of following established practice. The GPSU president called the action "provocative" and contradicted the government's claim that it could not afford to grant higher increases, citing an IMF report that "Guyana registered five years of consecutive robust growth and the contention that Guyana is set to collect a record-breaking amount of revenues this year."

Yarde referred to the 57-day national strike that took place in 1999, which resulted in a mediated agreement that included a 31 percent

increase.

In a letter to Permanent Secretary of the Office of the President, Dr. Nanda Gopaul, Yarde said, "The union's position is clear; the continued unilateral imposition by the government of annual, meager, across-the-board wage increases is an affront to ILO Conventions."

### **Mexican workers occupy municipal building over nonpayment of end-of-year bonuses**

More than 600 Reynosa, Tampico city workers occupied the Municipal Palace to protest the failure of Mayor Oscar Perez Inganzo to pay them year-end bonuses. Workers blockaded the entrance of the municipal building and the street in the early morning hours, obstructing surrounding roads with garbage collection trucks.

The bonus, required by law, is supposed to equal 50 days' salary. One hundred eighty-two former workers who were terminated without severance pay attended the protest as well.

Efren Cruz, representing the public service workers, told *El Imparcial* that the city was left without money when Perez Inganzo used municipal funds to buy a house in McAllen, Texas and move to the United States.

### **Grenadian port workers strike over retroactive pay**

About 50 port workers in St. George's, Grenada began a strike Wednesday amid allegations of Port Authority attempts to alter a retroactive pay agreement. The agreement, which covers around EC\$1.4 million (US\$540,000) owed to the workers since June 2008, was to have been signed on Monday, December 20.

The draft agreement had been to pay the retroactive payments during December 2010, March 2011 and October 2011.

However, Technical and Allied Workers Union (TAWU) President Chester Humphrey told CMC, "The port is seeking to put things into the agreement which (were) never discussed and never agreed upon and, as far as we are concerned, unless and until the workers receive their first payment, there will be no work until that happens." The TAWU claimed that the Port was trying to adjust levels and titles of some workers.

Port Authority Manager Ambrose Philip disputed Humphrey's charge and claimed that the Port had arranged to pay the workers the first installment before Christmas, but, "We will not do so while workers remain off the job. We shall not engage the unions while strike action continues against the authority."

### **Trinidad public workers union calls for general strike January 4**

The president of the 33,000-strong Trinidad and Tobago Public Service Association (PSA), Watson Duke, has called for a general strike on January 4 by public service workers if they do not get a salary increase. Duke has asked the workers to work half days until that date.

In addition, Duke asked for the support of the Maxi Taxi and Taxi Drivers Associations, the Public Transport Service Corporation's bus drivers, according to the *Trinidad Guardian*.

Declaring, "We are taking this to a new level next year," Duke told

reporters, "I expect the country to come to a halt that day. Government must understand there can be no peace until public servants get a piece of the national pie."

### **Los Angeles-area nurses strike two hospitals**

Over 1,000 nurses at two hospitals in West Hills and Riverside, California launched a five-day strike December 23 demanding safe staffer ratios and better pay. Talks between the Service Employees International Union and Hospital Corporation of America (HCA) broke off December 11 having failed to resolve issues of higher staffing ratios to ensure patient safety and better compensation.

Nurses at West Hills Hospital and Medical Center in Thousand Oaks, California were set to follow their counterparts at the other two hospitals, already on strike, but the union's negotiating team cancelled strike plans to resume negotiations.

HCA, the largest private operator of health care facilities in the world, has brought in replacement nurses to work during the strike. The company settled the largest Medicare fraud case in US history and has connections to the family fortunes of former Senate Majority leader Bill Frist, former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, and Florida Governor-elect Rick Scott.

### **California nurses protest unsafe nurse-patient staffing ratios**

Nurses at the Watsonville Community Hospital in California held informational pickets last week to protest low staffing ratios that they claim endanger patient safety. "It's a real problem; we need adequate staffing," said Lisa Harlow, a negotiator for the California Nurses Association. "We know inadequate staffing raises mortality rates."

The nurses at the Watsonville facility charge they do not have staff to cover during breaks and no assistants to help with the feeding, bathing and other issues related to patient care. The union has been in negotiations with hospital management for some 10 months. The old agreement expired back in October and the 275 nurses conducted a one-day-strike at that time. Watsonville Community hospital is one of 126 hospitals run by Community Health Systems, Inc., a Fortune 500 company based in Tennessee.

### **Quebec transit to stage one-day strike**

Bus drivers in Laval, Quebec, just west of Montreal, are scheduled to hold a one-day strike on January 10 after management halted contract talks and tabled a final offer that ignored union demands.

The 500 drivers employed by the Société de transport de Laval (STL) are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and have been without a contract since July of this year. One outstanding issue in the dispute is pensions, with the union saying that drivers in Montreal are retiring with twice the pensions of those in Laval.

The union has agreed in advance to designate some drivers as essential service workers and says they will call off the action if STL agrees to resume negotiations.



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