

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

2 February 2016

## Dominican Republic: University professors strike over raise, budget demands

On January 26, professors on the campuses of the public Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (UASD) struck to press a number of demands. The professors belong to the FAPROUASD professors' federation. A number of other educational organizations walked out as well, while others voiced support for the strike, but did not join it.

Chief among FAPROUASD's demands is a 40 percent increase in professors' salaries. Other demands are construction of more classrooms and labs, creation of more sections, capitalization of the pension plan and updating of the digital platform.

The UASD rector, Iván Grullón Fernández, told reporters that the University Council had contacted national President Danilo Medina to ask for help in resolving the conflict. He declared that a "direct and frank dialogue has been initiated [in the University Council building] of the authorities with the professors' unions and it is hoped that a solution to the impasse can be reached in a short time" so that academic activities can be resumed.

FAPROUASD president Santiago Guillermo called the meeting "a farce" and added, "The key to ending the strike is still in the hands of the rector. I figure that there is a lack of coherence between what is said and what is done."

## Jamaican air traffic controllers refuse duties over faulty equipment

After several months of complaining to the Jamaican Civil Aviation Authority (JCAA) about equipment malfunctions and failures at the island's two international airports, air traffic controllers began refusing to carry out certain duties in mid-January, after the communication system went down for 50 minutes. The Jamaican Air Traffic Controllers Association (JATCA) has since reported a number of other instances, with JATCA president Kurt Solomon saying that the controllers have lost confidence in the system.

The controllers are not on strike, but as Solomon told the *Jamaica Observer* on January 28, "Some of the equipment became unusable—we were not able to use it at all, and this [use of the equipment] goes hand in hand with the instructions that we have to give to the aircraft. There are certain functions that require using certain equipment. Members have opted not to carry out those functions. We are working with the tools that we have."

The JCAA claims that it is investing over \$JM15 million (\$US124,000) in upgrading equipment through a French firm that will be carrying out inspections and evaluations in the coming weeks. Meanwhile, the *Jamaica Gleaner* reported January 29 that the JATCA "says the situation poses a threat to the safety of users of Jamaica's airspace and exposes air traffic controllers to liability for using faulty and unreliable equipment to provide air traffic service."

A January 27 meeting between the JATCA and the JCAA at the Labour Ministry fell through and the issue is slated to go to the Industrial Disputes Tribunal. The air traffic controllers continue to refuse to work with the faulty equipment. JCAA director general Nari Singh said "contingency plans" are being implemented.

## Strike by Colombian tire plant workers ends after 104 days

About 180 workers at the Goodyear tire plant in Yumbo in Colombia's western Valle del Cauca department returned to the job last week after 104 days on strike. The workers, members of the SINTRAINCAPLA national rubber and plastics workers union, began their strike on October 13.

According to an October 23 Labor Information Agency report, "For 22 years, Goodyear-Colombia enjoyed a state of labor peace," negotiating with the union every two to five years, but "this time Goodyear changed that dynamic and refused to address the key points of the statement submitted to it by SINTRAINCAPLA." Instead, the company put out "a disastrous counter-proposal" while refusing to negotiate over salaries, benefits, layoffs and the use of temporary and two-tier workers.

After an extended deadline had been passed, the workers voted nearly 100 percent in favor of a strike. The union "called upon the public and trade unions and social organizations to provide support for their cause." Goodyear, which, since the closure of a Michelin plant in 2014, is the only tire producer in Colombia, transferred its production orders to its plant in Brazil. It threatened to move production to a plant that it has been planning to build in Mexico, and refused to pay accrued year-end bonuses or wages owed. The union and the company signed an agreement on January 29.

According to the union, "the salary adjustment stayed at 8.5 percent for the first year and the IPC [consumer price index] for the following year; and the other economic benefits (education and lodging, among others) rose between 8.5 and 10 percent. Also a bonus of 25 days of the basic salary was gotten for each worker for the signing of the convention."

## More protests against slated closing of Guyanese sugar factory

Protests against the planned closure of the Wales, West Bank Demerara (WBD) Sugar Estate factory (see 27 January Workers Struggles) in Guyana have continued. After two previous protests—one in front of the East Coast Demerara Estate and another in front of the Parliament—over 500 Wales workers and residents marched around the Patentia Scheme, a local housing project, to the West Bank market square, where workers and protest leaders addressed them.

Some 1,600 workers are employed at the WBD, and almost all the families in the area have at least one relative working there. Although the

Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) has claimed that WBD agricultural workers would be absorbed at other estates, some far from West Bank, a cloud of uncertainty has hung over the town since the government's January 18 announcement of the shutting of the plant by 2017.

One speaker, Gordon Thomas, was quoted by the *Guyana Times*: "They are dissatisfied with what is going on with the closing of Wales Estate because they say that their lives will be affected also. Because most people there depend on the Estate, because is either their husband, son or grandson or some close body is working there for them."

### **Argentine pilots stage walkout for higher salaries**

Pilots for LAN Argentina, one of the major international airlines in the nation, struck January 26 over salary demands. The strike led to delays and cancellations of flights to Chile, Peru and Ecuador from the Ezeiza International Airport outside the city of Buenos Aires.

The strike took place less than two weeks after a similar action January 14 was cut short on the orders of the government, which told the pilots to return to work while the UPSA pilots union, the APA aeronautic personnel union and LAN negotiators renewed stalled parity talks.

Like many workers in Argentina, the pilots are demanding a raise that will keep up with Argentina's galloping inflation rate, which is always officially underestimated. The new government of right-wing president Mauricio Macri so far has delayed publishing statistics on inflation, supposedly so that government statisticians can get a more accurate picture of the real rate.

UPSAs and APAs also accuse LAN of attempting to shift more jobs to contract workers and delay parity talks.

As with the January 14 action, this latest walkout was ostensibly for 24 hours, but the pilots returned to the job after a few hours on government orders. Negotiations were restarted the next day.

### **Partial strike by Chilean sanitary workers against overwork without overtime pay**

Refuse collectors for 19 communities in Chile's Talagante province began a partial strike January 29 to protest overwork following a fire at the communities' Santa Marta solid waste dump, which resulted in the facility's closure. The workers are members of the Cleaning, Gardens and Sanitary Landfill Business Employees Federation (Fenasinaj).

On January 18, a fire broke out at the landfill, generating a cloud of toxic smoke that blanketed several communities, including Santiago. The foul-smelling miasma caused itchy throats, burning eyes and breathing problems, and the fire was not completely extinguished until January 22. On that day, the Chilean Municipalities Association (AChM), on the orders of the Santiago Environmental Board, closed the site, forcing the communities to have their garbage sent to other locations miles away.

A Fenasinaj official complained that workers have been working 16-hour shifts with no overtime pay. He also cited residents' complaints on the backlog produced by having to take the trash miles away: "If there's a bag of trash in the street for more than three days, odors and percolated liquids start to be emitted, products of decomposition. And that attracts rats and other possible sources of infection. And all that increases with the heat." Fenasinaj demands the reopening of the Santa Marta site, citing a Valparaíso Catholic University study claiming that it can be done safely.

On January 28, Fenasinaj reps met with and the Metropolitan Administration, the Environmental Superintendence and the Industrial Relations Commission, who agreed to look into the pay demand and arranged another meeting "to review the results of the investigations." However, they did not budge on the demand to reopen Santa Marta. Fenasinaj has said that the strike will continue until the workers get the pay and Santa Marta is reopened.

### **Food service workers in nation's Capitol charge wage theft**

Washington, DC Senate cafeteria service workers who work in the nation's Capitol have filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board alleging wage theft against the vendor Restaurant Associates. Workers have conducted a half-dozen strikes since November seeking to unionize and obtain wage increases.

The Architect of the Capitol (AOC) renegotiated the contract in December—without any input from the workers—and claimed that Level 1 cooks would get a \$3.65 hourly raise to \$17.45, and Level 2 cooks would see a wage hike of \$5.70 to \$19.50 an hour. But a number of cooks found themselves reassigned to the category of "food service worker" who previously made \$12.30 an hour and would only see their wage increased to \$13.80.

The food service workers have been campaigning for over a year through the organization "Good Jobs Nation" to secure better wages. Back in November, Senator and Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders led a stunt to get a majority of the Senate Democratic Caucus to send a letter to Restaurant Associates' British parent company, Compass Group.

"The time has come for the Compass Group to ensure Senate cafeteria workers have a model employer that addresses its workers' legitimate concerns," said the letter. "These protests have attracted negative publicity not only to your company, but also to the institution of the Senate."

Vice President Joe Biden also added his endorsement of the campaign and filmmaker Michael Moore has also become involved.

### **Rotating strikes continue in Montreal**

Eight thousand white-collar workers employed by the City of Montreal have entered their second week of rotating strike action against Mayor Denis Coderre's plans to privatize and subcontract a portion of the jobs previously performed by the unionized workers. The workers have been without a contract since 2011. Overall, Coderre's austerity policy seeks to slash the budget for salaries by 12 to 14 percent. The series of one-day rotating strikes, alongside an overtime ban, will continue until the end of February. On March 1, all 8,000 workers will participate in a one-day general strike across the entire city.

The Coderre administration, a close ally of the provincial and federal Liberal governments, is taking a hard-line stance against the worker actions. Previously it spearheaded the drive for provincial legislation slashing the pensions of municipal workers and campaigned for the province to give Quebec municipalities the power to legalize job action and unilaterally impose contracts in the event of an "impasse" in negotiations. In December, the Coderre administration imposed week-long suspensions of 2,000 blue collar workers for having participated in a union meeting during working hours.



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