

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

14 June 2016

## Strike by Argentine air traffic controllers over contract

Air traffic controllers at over 30 airports across Argentina began a 48-hour strike on the morning of June 10. In a press release, the State Workers Association (ATE) said that it had called the strike “in response to the grave situation that the sector is going through, with the loss of labor and salary stability. It is just that the national government, in an illegal form, wants to impose by the hand of a company syndicate, an agreement for Aerial Navigation Services, generating the conditions prior to an imminent privatization.”

The syndicate referred to is the ATEPSA technical and security union, which signed a contract with the Aerial Navigation Enterprise (EANA), a branch of the Transport Ministry created last year. The contract was signed without consulting ATE.

The Labor Ministry claimed that the walkout “has nothing to do with a complaint by the workers, but with a dispute between union officials” and that the EANA had brought “great benefits” to the workers.

On June 11, units of the Airport Security Police (PSA) dislodged striking workers at the Jorge Newbery international airport in Buenos Aires on the orders of a judge who decreed that the workers attend “obligatory conciliation” talks. An ATE official retorted, “The obligatory conciliation can’t take place because this was already conciliated in May and we always participate in meetings, but none of the points were resolved. And in the case of being dictated to, we are not going to comply.”

The strike broke out in the context of a wave of firings nationwide, an official inflation rate of 40 percent and 200 percent hikes in public service fees adopted by the current government of Mauricio Macri. The Macri government has also increased the powers of the police and military and pushed a privatization and “labor flexibility” agenda.

## Colombian farmworkers suspend blockades during negotiations

On June 10, leaders of the Cumbre Agraria (Agrarian Summit) coalition of Colombian small farmers and farmworkers agreed to suspend their blockades of highways and attend negotiations with the government. The strike and blockades, called a “minga,” began eleven days earlier to protest broken promises made by the government following similar protests in 2013.

Although strike leaders had agreed to talks on June 4, resistance to calling off the minga was strong enough that many of the over 34,000 protesters refused to end the blockade. Three protesters were killed and hundreds were injured and/or arrested, bringing calls for international intervention.

Cumbre Agraria’s agreement included a three-day suspension of the blockade. The government, which professes to “hold open the doors to dialogue,” at first had agreed to meet in an indigenous area, La María, while refusing to meet in an afro-colombian settlement, a move that prompted colombiareports.com to note, “Many saw this as being part of a governmental “divide and rule” strategy, much like the one they employed in the 2013 agrarian protests in which dozens were killed.”

The government then agreed to meet in the afro-colombian settlement, Quinamayo, and protesters suspended the blockades, though not their deep suspicions.

## Federal troops sent to Chiapas against protesting teachers

Some 4,000 Federal Police were dispatched to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, capital of the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, in the early hours of June 11. The soldiers, who were installed in barracks in the capital, were sent to impede the “violent acts” of teachers, such as occupations of buildings and blockades of highways.

The teachers, members of the CNTE federation, have held protests in various cities against the education “reform” agenda of President Enrique Peña Nieto. On June 3, thousands of police prevented teachers from marching to Mexico City’s international airport.

Undercover agents of the state police have infiltrated the teachers in Tuxtla Gutiérrez. On June 10, teachers held and exposed two plainclothesmen who were attempting to provoke violent acts during the occupation of the office of the Secretariat of Education.

That day, the teachers had marched in the state capital, where they have maintained an encampment since May 15.

## Jamaican construction workers strike for wage increase

More than 700 workers at a hotel construction site in Negril, a resort town in western Jamaica, struck on June 6 for an increase in their wages. The workers, who are members of the National Workers Union (NWU) and the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU), currently earn between 1,500 and 2,000 Jamaican dollars (US\$12.00 and \$16.00) per day.

At a protest at the entrance to the Royalton Hotel construction site, the workers demanded a 50 percent increase in their pay, in keeping with the industry standard, and declared that they would not return until they got it. Workers also complained of inadequate safety equipment.

Since then, RJR News reported that some of the workers resumed

duties on June 8 and that NWU and BITU reps “are in discussions with the more than 700 workers at the construction site.” There has been no other reporting on the issue since then.

### **New negotiations following lockout at Connecticut beer distributor**

New talks were slated to begin over the weekend in the lockout of 120 drivers and warehouse workers on June 8 at Hartford Distributors in Manchester, Connecticut. According to Teamsters Local 1035, which represents workers at the beer distributor, management informed the union it would not allow workers to return to work until they had agreed to a contract that calls for an end to the old health insurance that did not require workers to pay premiums.

The union rejected a temporary contract extension offered by Hartford Distributors that contained a clause requiring workers to give up their right to strike. Meanwhile, the company immediately brought in replacement workers to continue distribution operations.

The use of replacement workers has antagonized locked out workers and caused fear among non-union workers at the facility. Workers at Hartford Distributors struck in 2003 and 2008. After settling the 2008 strike, a number of contract extensions were implemented continuing up to the present.

One of the replacement workers from 2008, Omar Thornton, was retained by the company, and in 2010 was accused of stealing beer and selling it for his personal gain. Following a meeting with management, Thornton shot and killed eight co-workers and then committed suicide, claiming he was the victim of racism.

### **One-day strike by Chicago sheet metal workers**

Members of Sheet Metal Workers Local 73 set up a picket line on Campus North near Chicago May 31 following a vote to reject a contract offered by the employers’ group Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association. One day later, the employers offered a new contract, which was ratified by union officials. The strike was suspended pending a ratification vote of the several thousand members of the local in Cook and Lake counties.

### **Visiting South African firefighters strike in Alberta**

The 300 South African firefighters who came to Alberta two weeks ago to assist in battling forest fires around Fort McMurray went on strike last week, causing a media firestorm, after learning that their wages would be less than half the minimum wage in the province.

The firefighters are employed by Working on Fire, a South African government-funded agency, which revealed only after they arrived, that they would be paid just \$50 a day, when they had been expecting wages comparable to Canadian firefighters—or at least minimum wage, which is CAN\$11.20 an hour. The employer said there is some

misunderstanding and that they would receive the rest of their pay when they returned home, but some firefighters have said that in recent experience such promises were not honored.

They were only part way through a 14-day work cycle when all 300 walked off the job after an informal outdoor meeting. Apologies have been issued from the South African government and Alberta Premier Rachel Notley has intervened to promise that the issue would be rectified immediately.

### **Rail workers poised to strike**

Some 1,800 employed by Via Rail across Canada could be on strike or lockout this week after their union, Unifor, issued a strike notice last Friday.

Workers, including attendants, maintenance, office and administrative staff, early in the month delivered a near-unanimous strike mandate to the union after working without a contract since the end of last year.

Negotiations, which the company says are ongoing, have involved a government negotiator right up to the strike deadline. The company has issued a notice to passengers of possible service interruptions, but assured that refunds or credit would be available to those affected.

### **Ontario property assessors set to strike**

With talks ongoing this week, 1,300 workers employed by the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) are facing a strike or lockout deadline of June 17 if a deal can’t be reached before that time.

Talks, which have been ongoing for months and included a provincial conciliator, remain blocked over a number of issues, including wages and benefits. The workers are represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and negotiators say that the current wage offer is 1.5 percent over three years. MPAC is a government-funded corporation, which is responsible for assessing property values in the province for taxation purposes.



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