

Ground crew strike at Toronto International Airport

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Seven hundred ground crew and baggage handlers at Toronto's Pearson International Airport are in the third week of a strike against a vicious, concessionary contract proposal from Swissport.

Under a Greater Toronto Airport Authority contract, Swissport services flights of some 30 passenger airlines, including KLM, British Airways, Air France, Emirates, Sunwing, and Air Transat. It also provides ground services for cargo airlines such as UPS, that fly out of Toronto's main airport.

Highly profitable Swissport International is the world's leading supplier of airport services to the aviation industry and is active in 48 countries with service contracts at more than 280 airports. A one-time subsidiary of Swissair, Swissport is now owned by the China-based HNA Group. Its revenues exceeded US \$3 billion in 2016.

Swissport's Canadian subsidiary is seeking a three-year wage freeze, reduced benefits eligibility, and a more onerous and unpredictable shift schedule. At \$14 per hour, under the company offer, workers would be earning Ontario's legal minimum wage as of next January 1, when an increase in the provincial rate is to take effect.

Members of Teamsters Local 419, the Toronto Swissport workers voted 95 percent to reject the company's derisory contract proposals, then walked out on strike July 27.

Although a mediator is in place, there have been no talks since the strike began.

In anticipation of a strike, Swissport management hired several hundred temporary workers who have received only a few days of training. Normally, training for such key tasks as airplane-load balancing and plane-towing can take up to four weeks. Already there have been reports of damage to planes, improperly parked

aircraft, flight delays and lost luggage. Last week, paramedics were called onto the tarmac to tend to a replacement worker who had suffered serious injury while unloading a plane.

Concerns have also been raised regarding the maintenance of proper security at the airport. To facilitate the company's strike-breaking, background checks on new hires have been fast-tracked. Full checks that generally take more than three months are being completed in a matter of days.

Union spokesmen have said that flights are being delayed, bags lost and freight shipments backed up. Customer complaints have verified these claims. To date, management has admitted only to "hiccups" in service.

Airport workers around the world are brutally exploited as giant transnational service companies offering the lowest bids scoop up dozens and even hundreds of lucrative contracts. Last month, ground crews at Newark, New York's LaGuardia and Kennedy, and Philadelphia airports struck against PrimeFlight, like Swissport, a major supplier of airport services.

PrimeFlight Inc. has developed a reputation for illegal labor practices and has regularly withheld wages from workers. The company has been forced to pay \$3.3 million in penalties and settlements since 2005. Last year the company also agreed to issue \$1.8 million in back pay to 152 airport workers in Seattle. Workers in New Jersey filed a suit against PrimeFlight for wage theft last fall, and workers in New York filed a similar suit earlier this year.

This week, 350 striking airport security workers in Barcelona defied government strike-breaking threats to continue their action against the poverty wages paid them by the Spanish multinational Eulen Inc. which

registered a 65 percent profit increase over the past year alone.

The entire global airline industry today seeks to squeeze every last ounce of blood and sweat from both its ground and in-the-air workforce, whilst offering an ever declining customer experience. A US study has shown that labour costs in the industry have dropped by 21 percent since 1980 while airline workers are subjected to grueling schedules and passengers packed into planes like sardines in a can. The drive by the entire aviation industry to extract the last dollar in profit is highlighted in Swissport's current attack on the ground crews at Toronto's airport.

While the Swissport workers are showing great militancy, the Teamsters and the other major unions that represent Canada's airlines workers—Unifor, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and the International Association of Machinists—are leaving them isolated.

On the grounds that workers have no dispute with airline passengers, the Teamsters have vowed that the strike will not disrupt airline schedules and service. Such action would not just cut into the profit margins of the airlines. It would rapidly expose the right-wing character of the union-supported federal Liberal government, which would quickly heed the demands of big business that it intervene to end the strike and ensure "essential services."

The Trudeau government has already made clear its attitude toward air travel industry workers, by announcing regulatory changes aimed at facilitating the creation of "ultra-low cost" airlines. Such airlines offer heavily discounted fares by imposing sweatshop wages and work regimes on their employees and, by increasing "competitive pressures," invariably pave the way for the major, established carriers to demand further contract concessions from their own workers.



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