

Striking Toronto baggage handlers reject offer, continue job action

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Striking Toronto baggage handlers reject offer

Workers at Toronto's Pearson International Airport employed by Swissport International who have been on strike for over a month, last week rejected a proposed contract that was reportedly almost identical to the one they originally turned down.

The 700 baggage handlers and other ground crew rejected the latest offer by 98 percent, up from 95 percent who voted against the contract that took them out on strike. Though details have not been made public, according to the Teamsters Union, their bargaining agent, Swissport—which provides services for a number of major airlines—is demanding a three-year wage freeze, cuts in benefits and greater control over work schedules.

Some flights have been affected by the strike and the union says that 250 replacement workers hired since before the strike began are poorly trained and responsible for lost and damaged luggage among other problems.

Ground crew have been on strike since July after overwhelmingly voting down the company's final offer. Details of the latest proposal have not been made public.

Locked out B.C. health plan workers head to mediation

Over 600 workers who have been locked out for two months by Pacific Blue Cross, one of the province's largest health benefits providers, is heading into mediated negotiations next week following numerous fruitless efforts to reach a new deal.

The workers are organized under the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), whose negotiators have reached an impasse over benefits and pensions. The union claims that the non-profit company would return less than one per-cent of payroll costs if their concession demands were granted and that any savings would be rolled back into the business.

Mexican college workers strike over benefits, irregularities, workloads

Professors and administrative workers at campuses of the Baccalaureate College of Chiapas (Cobach) went on strike August 23. The walkout followed fruitless discussions with the general director of the Cobach system.

The striking workers named a number of reasons for the job action: lack of infrastructure and their own area; failure to deliver benefits to workers under the collective contract; irregularities in assignments of posts at work centers by management.

In addition, they say that the authorities in the general directorship have reneged on contract agreements with their union, Suicobach, and on guarantees not to let hourly workloads be affected, the latter a byproduct of the new education model. They also point out that although the Cobach directorate recently claimed to have suffered a budget cut of 200 million pesos (US\$11.3 million), "nonetheless, in the documents that resource appears as earmarked."

Puerto Rican unions call for protests against austerity measures

A number of Puerto Rican unions called for protests on August 25 and August 30 against austerity measures imposed by the fiscal control board appointed to shift the island's economic crisis onto the backs of the working class. The mobilizations were scheduled to take place in the capital San Juan, on the so-called Golden Mile, the banking district, site of the World Plaza Building, where the board is headquartered.

The protests' aims are to demand the rescission of various board measures: reduction of the work day for public employees; elimination of the Christmas bonus; a 10 percent cut in retiree pensions; privatizations and layoffs, among others. Protesters will also demand an independent citizens' audit of the public debt.

Paraguayan teachers hold two-day walkout over wage demands

Primary and secondary public school teachers in Paraguay stopped work on August 24 and 25 to press their salary demands. The Teachers' Federation called the strike following meetings with Education Ministry negotiators.

The government offered an increase—to take effect in 2018—of 8 percent for teachers with 20 years seniority, and 5 percent for those with less seniority. The teachers want a 32 percent raise, in a nation where the average teacher's monthly salary is 1.9 million guaranías,

the equivalent of US\$340. The teachers' demand is 3 million guaranías, or US\$540.

According to the Teachers' Federation, participation in the strike was around 90 percent on the first day, but fell the next day. Since the protests had no effect on the government, federation officials plan on protest marches in various cities nationwide this week, with an indefinite general strike to follow.

One-day strike and march by Argentine teachers in opposition to wage offer

Two Buenos Aires teachers' unions—the Education Workers' Union (UTE) and the Middle and Superior School Teaching Association (Ademys)—held a 24-hour strike on August 24. In addition to the strike, teachers gathered at the City Education Ministry and marched to the National Congress.

The walkout was called in opposition to the city's wage raise offer of 21.5 percent, which union leaders called “one of the lowest salary recompositions in the nation,” and compared it to the 30 percent raise obtained by the Lighting, Sweeping and Cleaning union.

Education Minister Soledad Acuna called the UTE “a union of the left, absolutely minoritarian, that never accepts any agreement,” and noted that 15 of 17 unions accepted the offer on August 10. Ademys secretary general Jorge Adaro asserted that the teachers in those unions had not accepted the proposal, but had been informed of it “through the media.”

UTE claimed 80 percent adherence to the job action, while the city's Minister of Education contended that the figure was 30 percent. Adaro called the proposed salary “below the poverty line” and advocated “a channel of dialogue to improve this proposal that stayed below even the proposal of Buenos Aires province.”

Chilean plant and animal agency workers strike over contract issues, work status

Workers for Chile's Agricultural and Livestock Service (SAG) went on a 24-hour strike on August 24. Their main demands were the transfer of nonpermanent, fee-paid workers to permanent status and respect for the agreement signed in December.

SAG is responsible for inspecting and certifying agricultural, forestry and livestock products, preventing the entrance of diseases and pests from other countries, and certifying the health of plants and animals for export. Its workforce is a mix of permanent, temporary and “honorario” or fee-paid workers.

In the north-central coastal region of Coquimbo, some 1,400 workers are on the fee system in SAG, and they earn less and gain fewer benefits than their permanent-status fellow workers. The striking workers there considered the action a “warning strike” that coincided with other protests by truckers in the region.

However, “SAG management clarified that, although the tasks connected to services took place slowly, necessary measures were taken so as not to affect work of border control, importations, exports and certification, as well as work in slaughterhouses,” reported

diariodeldia.cl.

Seattle office workers strike union pension administration office

Some 100 office administrators from Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 8 in Seattle struck the Welfare and Pension Administration Service (WPAS) last Wednesday against company attempts to impose draconian concessions. The office workers, without a contract since February, reached the end of their rope after 11 months of negotiations and 12 bargaining sessions.

The WPAS, which administers benefits for union pension plans, wants to eliminate seniority rights and have the power to lay people off at management's discretion. It also wants to decrease company contributions to medical benefits and is demanding higher contributions from its workers. WPAS also wants to lengthen the time needed for part-time employees to qualify for health benefits, and it wants to remove the cap on medical premium cost share increases. Last year the office workers agreed to withdraw from their pensions, and now WPAS is refusing to contribute to employee 401k funds to a level that will reestablish their retirements.

Management is offering a measly 12.5 percent salary increase over four years and a similarly miserly contribution to benefits and 401k plans. The average salary is only \$27 per hour.

WPAS claims that some workers have crossed the picket lines. The company also has been hiring temps to continue its operations as well as using other locations from California to Alaska to assist it in the attempt to wear down the strikers.

Spectrum strike continues through fifth month

The strike by 1,700 Spectrum telecommunications workers in New York and New Jersey is now heading toward completion of its fifth month, with the International Brotherhood of Electrical workers and the Communications Workers of American continue to isolate the workers.

The workers struck after rejecting plans by Spectrum to move them into a substandard pension and health plan. The strikers include technicians, dispatchers, constructors, engineers, and warehouse workers.

The strategy of the unions, based on pressuring Democratic New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, has failed miserably. The isolation of the Spectrum strike follows the betrayal last year by the CWA of the strike against Verizon, which ended with workers paying sharply higher health care expenses.



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