

## Baggage-handlers' strike at Toronto airport enters third month

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

strikebreaking operations.

### Baggage-handlers' strike at Toronto airport enters third month

A strike by 700 Swissport baggage handlers and ground crew at Toronto's Pearson International Airport is entering its third month, with the Teamsters union working to isolate the strike and run it into the ground.

Swissport, one of the world's largest airline service providers, is demanding a three-year wage freeze, cuts in benefits, and greater control over work schedules. The workers, who are paid a starting wage of just \$11.75 per hour, are fighting against these poverty wages, as well as for improved working conditions and benefits. Swissport has hired a full complement of scabs with the full blessing of the federal government-owned Greater Toronto Airport Authority (GTAA), leading to numerous safety violations and damage to travelers' belongings.

After workers initially voted down a rotten concessions-laden contract offer by a 95-percent margin, the Teamsters leadership inexplicably presented a second, virtually identical offer, which was again rejected. In September, the Teamsters leadership, in partnership with other unions, organized a toothless solidarity rally that nonetheless prompted the GTAA to impose severe restrictions on where the strikers can picket. The union leadership has done nothing to challenge these flagrantly anti-democratic restrictions.

The Teamsters bureaucracy, which boasts of representing 125,000 workers across the country, has done nothing to mobilize the thousands of other workers across the airline industry against the prevalence of poverty wages and horrid working conditions. Instead, the union has declared its support for the Trudeau Liberal government, who, as the administrator of the GTAA, has sanctioned Swissport's

### Sugar mill workers in Argentina organize blockade

On September 28, striking sugar mill workers at the Ledesma Sugar mill in Libertador, Jujuy province, in Argentina blockaded a main highway as part of their struggle over wages. The workers have been on strike for over two weeks and are fighting parity with the wages won at other sugar mills. The Ledesma management has the support of municipal and provincial authorities and is refusing to negotiate with the strikers over wages. Instead it seeks a series of givebacks in a new contract.

The workers together with their spouses and supporters beat back a police attempt to clear the highway. Ledesma is the biggest sugar mill in Argentina.

### Rally in support of striking research workers in Argentina

One hundred and fifty employees of the provincial Scientific Research Commission who went on strike on September 18, occupying their facility in the city of La Plata, held a protest rally on Friday. At issue is the government's refusal to obey a binding arbitration order, issued on August 24, to pay workers for overtime hours.

The workers declared themselves on "permanent assembly," carried signs contrasting their inadequate wages with those of their bosses, and denounced right-wing governor María Eugenia Vidal for continuing to ignore the arbitrator's finding.

## **Brazilian teachers hold rally**

Thousands of public school teachers from the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul rallied in Porto Alegre and voted to stay on strike. The teachers are members of the CPERS union. The strike is in its third week. The strikers are demanding an end to wage cuts and a proposal to pay back wages in monthly installments, as well as the cancellation of a package of concessions and attacks on education that they call a “package of evil.” A CPERS spokesperson denounced State governor José Ivo Sartori for his intransigence and called for unity with students and their parents in defense of quality public education. Following the rally, the strikers carried out a mass march through downtown Porto Alegre.

## **Avianca pilots on strike in Colombia**

A strike by 700 pilots employed by Colombia’s flagship airline, Avianca, is now entering its second week. Nearly 2,000 flights have been cancelled. The main issue in the strike is wages. Last Tuesday, Avianca management, threatening to hire foreign pilots, presented the strikers with an ultimatum—a 13 percent wage increase that barely makes up for past inflation, and 1.5 percent in 2018 and 1.75 percent in 2019—then walked away from the negotiation table.

## **Seattle, Washington pension fund workers return to work**

The Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 8 in Seattle reached an tentative agreement with Welfare and Pension Administration Services Inc., which was struck for almost five weeks by some 100 office workers. The WPAS administers union pension and health care funds.

The union website reported that on September 25, “members voted overwhelmingly to accept the TA and return to work the next day...”

The rotten character of the deal is indicated by the fact that the union has released no details. There is no indication of the fate of 10 workers terminated by WPAS management. Most of the 10 women had been employed at WPAS for over 15 years, with one of them having worked there for 30

years. The only reported action taken by Local 8 has been the filing of unfair labor practice charges.

## **Washington state farm workers strike over abuse and working conditions**

Two consecutive strikes by 17 workers at the Larson Fruit Company in Quincy, Washington ended last month with an agreement to fire an abusive foreman. The workers—who pick apples, are from Mexico and work under the H2-A—compiled a list of 34 grievances that included complaints such as not being able to see a doctor after falling off ladders, working while sick and lack of cleaning supplies.

The workers conducted their first strike on September 6 -7 after submitting their grievances. The following day, Washington state Department of Labor & Industries conducted an investigation and on September 9, the company fired three workers. This precipitated a second strike lasting four days. A Northwest farmworker union, Familias Unidas por la Justicia (Families United for Justice), intervened and got an agreement with the company to hire back the fired workers.

“It was the verbal abuse and the insults,” declared Ulises Perez, one of the strikers told the Seattle Times. “We just decided that we were not going to take it anymore... People are motivated by fear not to speak up, but we have to put that fear aside and defend our rights”

The union says that they are receiving a growing number of complaints and have intervened in other conflicts. With the reduction in the entry of undocumented workers, the use of H2-A workers has skyrocketed. In 2017, Washington state growers requested 18,550 workers under the H2-A program, four times the number requested five years ago. Larson Fruit has a total of 150 of these workers laboring on 1,500 acres of apple orchards.

The workers make \$13.38 per hour and work about nine months for Larsen. They are concerned about being rehired again next year. According to rumors, those under the H2-A program face blacklisting if workers speak out.



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