

## Halifax shipyard workers stage wildcat walkout

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

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Hundreds of workers employed by Irving Shipbuilding Inc. in Halifax, Nova Scotia walked off the job for several hours last Thursday when they noticed that their paychecks no longer included pension contributions on overtime pay.

The workers, whose union Unifor publicly disavowed the walkout, returned to work after management met with the workers and agreed to continue paying the pension contributions. The 800 workers at the shipyard had voted 95 percent in favor of strike action before their last contract expired at the end of 2017, but their union had explicitly and publicly asked that they stay on the job despite the company provocation.

Irving Shipbuilding is the primary contractor for the combat portion of the Canadian Navy's National Shipbuilding Strategy.

### Montreal school bus drivers set to strike

After working without a contract since last June, 330 drivers employed by Autobus Transco on the island of Montreal last week voted to go on strike this week if current mediated negotiations do not produce a deal.

The Syndicat des travailleuses et travailleurs de Transco-CSN, the union representing drivers in contract talks, is asking for two percent annual increases—roughly the inflation rate—in a three-year deal. Autobus Transco, which is owned by First Student Inc., based in Cincinnati, Ohio, is asking for a two-year wage freeze in a five-year deal with the remaining increases limited to half the rate of inflation.

Several school boards are affected by the dispute, with many telling parents that there will be no penalty for students kept home due to a strike.

### Mexican municipal workers strike for unpaid bonus

Workers for the Chilpancingo Potable Water and Sewage System Commission (Capach) began an indefinite strike January 24 and gathered outside the Capach headquarters. The striking workers are demanding the second half of the payment of their end-of-year bonus as well as vacation pay.

Chilpancingo is the capital and second-largest city of the southern Mexican coastal state of Guerrero. Nearly 200 workers have yet to receive their end-of-year bonus, or aguinaldo, which adds up to about 2,800,000 pesos (US\$151,000).

City authorities had previously told the workers' union that the payments would be delivered by January 20, a promise that went unfulfilled. Services such as firefighting, distribution of water to communities, and repair and plugging of leaks were halted. Some administrative workers struck, though offices remained open for bill payments.

### Colombian subcontracted palm plantation workers strike for employee status

Following a near-unanimous January 25 strike vote (668 out of 682), over 1,000 subcontracted workers for the Colombian palm industry firm Indupalma walked off the job to demand that they be given full-time employee status and be treated with dignity. The plantation, located in San Alberto, in the northern department of Cesar, is notorious for violating Colombian labor laws with impunity.

The striking workers are members of the Third-Party Agribusiness Workers General Union (UGTTA), which they formed last year. An article on [solidaritycenter.org](http://solidaritycenter.org) reported that “despite the region's history of threats and violence against workers who form unions, the union has grown from 248 to some 1,010 members. The union reports four members have received death threats in 2018.”

The article also points out, “Unlike workers who are recognized as employees, subcontracted palm oil workers must purchase their own tools, as well as join and pay dues to phony “cooperatives”—structures that enable companies to evade legal responsibilities under the labor law.”

Indupalma has subcontracted workers to skirt Colombia's already lax labor laws for over 20 years, opting to pay or appeal fines instead of hiring them on full-time and being subject to minimal requirements for wages, rights and conditions. The company had not responded to the Labor Ministry's call for tripartite negotiations as of January 26.

### **Colombian leader of last year's "civic strike" assassinated**

On January 27, Temístocles Machado, a leading figure in the three-week-long "civic strike" in Colombia's Pacific port city of Buenaventura last year, was shot to death in a parking lot on his property by a gang member. Machado's murder occurred as meetings between government figures and leaders of the 2017 protests were taking place to evaluate compliance and progress on the agreement signed in August to address issues of poverty, inadequate infrastructure and social services, violence and corruption that plagued the mainly Afro-Colombian working class of Colombia's largest port.

Residents had engaged in protest actions in 2010, 2014 and 2016 against the horrendous conditions. In 2017, Machado played a leading role in the Communal Action Board (JAC), one of the organizations formed to demand attention and action from the local powers-that-be.

An agreement was signed in August in which the government promised to provide, subject to congressional approval, billions of pesos for investment in hospitals, infrastructure, education, social services, housing and economic development et al., in addition to an increase in the general budget. The plan was called the "Autonomous Patrimony Fund."

Machado had taken part in the August talks, but had not attended the recent meetings, citing family concerns. At least 73 leaders of social organizations were assassinated last year, but government officials claim that his murder was unrelated to the civic strike. The Civic Strike Committee produced a video on social media condemning the killing and calling for a "permanent assembly" to plan a response to the crime.

### **Guyanese sweeper/cleaners protest over pay, conditions**

Sweeper/cleaners in the Upper Demerara-Berbice region of Guyana held a protest outside the Regional Democratic Council (RDC) January 24. The sweeper/cleaners, who are usually assigned to clean up schools, expressed their dissatisfaction over their wages, working conditions and other issues.

The workers, mostly women, are subcontracted and their monthly pay is around 24,740 Guyanese dollars—less than US\$120—per month. They do not have permanent contracts and some have even been paid under the table with no contracts at all. The protesters demanded the regularization of their jobs, and eight

hours a day, so that they can be paid at least the minimum wage. In addition, they had been promised a raise in September and January that never materialized.

Another complaint is the lack of adequate equipment. One worker told [guyanatimes.com](http://guyanatimes.com), "We don't have any protective gear to work with. Sometimes we go to work, we can't get gloves; we need long boots because sometimes the place flooded and we have to walk in the water with wet shoes."

Conditions, particularly in the bathrooms, are in a deplorable state. If a worker calls in sick, she gets no sick pay due to her part-time, nonpermanent status. Disrespect and shabby treatment were common complaints among the protesters, and one cleaner asserted that the protest would have been larger, but that many of her coworkers were afraid of being blacklisted.

After the demonstration, the RDC Regional Executive Officer, who had ignored the previous petitions and requests for a meeting, called a meeting with the workers and the Guayana Public Service Union representative.

### **California school bus strike nears two-week mark**

The strike by 200 bus drivers for school districts in Pasadena, Alhambra and Glendale, California is closing in on its second week with no negotiations scheduled between Teamsters Local 572 and the transportation contractor First Student. Drivers have twice rejected proposals by the company before finally walking off the job on January 18.

Workers appear to be most agitated by the fact that healthcare benefits absorb 40 percent of their paycheck. Workers are also complaining about low pay and paid time off.

First Student has been aggressively seeking to convince drivers to cross picket lines by offering bonuses. At this point only about a dozen union members have crossed and the company is holding job fairs in what is considered an effort to line up strikebreakers. When asked if the company would recruit non-union replacements, a First Student spokesman answered, "Certainly we can eventually, if it comes to that. Absolutely."

First Student is a subsidiary of the Scottish transport company FirstGroup. Its division FirstGroup America is the largest provider of school bus services in the United States.



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