

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

## Chilean public workers and airline workers strike

11 December 2018

### Chilean public workers strike over layoffs

Public employees throughout Chile went on an indefinite strike December 6 in response to the layoff of over 2,000 public workers since March, when the conservative government of Sebastián Piñera took office. The ANEF public employees union claims that the layoffs violate the terms of a recently signed agreement that included a 3.5 percent wage hike.

Several hundred protesters marched to the La Moneda presidential palace and the Finance Ministry in Santiago, where they were confronted by Special Forces of the Carabineros national police. Some pushing and shoving took place, but no injuries were reported.

According to reports there was a high participation rate in the walkout. ANEF said the layoffs violate agreements reached during recent talks on pay increases.

### Chilean airport workers strike for improved pay, better working conditions

Workers for Latin America's major airline, LATAM, went on strike December 7. The 270 workers, members of the SINLATAM union, handle boarding, sales and VIP and preferential seating zones. Their demands include higher salaries and elimination of night shifts for female workers who are mothers. Another demand is an end-of-conflict bonus of 3 million pesos (US\$4,444).

This is the second strike against the LATAM this year. In April, over 1,000 crewmembers for LAN Express, a low-cost LATAM subsidiary, went on strike over pay parity, shift patterns and working conditions. Their union unilaterally ended the strike after 17 days.

### Bermudan teaching assistants hold sick-out over working conditions

Teaching assistants in Bermuda called in sick on December 6 to protest the Ministry of Education's foot dragging over a range of problems within the school system.

The Ministry and the Bermuda Union of Teachers (BUT) have been holding talks, but 23 "items of concern" remained unresolved. Among those items, which were on a list submitted to the ministry by the BUT, were: lack of breaks for teaching assistants; lack of job

classification; shortages of mentor teachers and allocated substitute teachers; rundown infrastructure; and outdated computer software.

Principals, teachers, assistants and parents have all deplored the state of uncertainty of the system and the lack of progress in the talks. In many of the schools, teachers called in sick as well. Teachers, disgruntled with their own working conditions, held a work to rule last month over "unbearable working conditions," as one principal told *Royal Gazette* reporters.

### Bahaman nurses vote for strike

Public hospital nurses on New Providence, Grand Bahama Island and Exuma—the three largest islands in the Bahamas—voted by 570 to 3 for strike action on December 4. Nurses are concerned about the planned implementation by the Public Hospitals Authority (PHA) of a shift system that it claims would standardize schedules and improve patient services. The nurses fear that it would lead to overwork, medication errors, degradation of patient care and lower pay.

It was the second time that the Bahamas Nurses Union (BNU) held a strike vote. The nurses voted 377 to 7 to walk last June, but the Ministry of Labour claimed that the vote was null and void because ballots had not been delivered to Inagua, Mayaguana and San Salvador, three of the 14 inhabited "Family Islands." On October 30, nurses stopped work for one day, in an action that the BNU was quick to call a walkout, not a strike.

The day before the vote, the PHA announced that "all outstanding matters with the BNU had been resolved, and that the only remaining issue was the implementation of a standardized shift system for nurses," and announced its deferral. The vote was held nonetheless. The BNU sent the results to the Ministry of Labour for certification.

### Jamaican port workers strike over unfulfilled contract provisions

The Kingston Freeport Terminal in Jamaica was hit with a strike by over 1,200 workers December 7. A Trade Union Congress official claims that management has not adhered to several agreed-upon provisions and that in some cases management changed them.

Among the failures to comply and changes were job classifications, evaluations and rankings, pay rates and the timeframe for payment of retroactive wages.

## **Panamanian retirees protest president's veto of pension boost**

A group of Panamanian retirees marched—or rode in wheelchairs—to Panama City on December 7 to protest President Juan Carlos Varela's veto of a pension increase approved by the National Assembly in October. The raise, which would have been financed by a tax increase on remittances sent by foreigners working in Panama and a levy on net profits from gambling, would have added from \$35 to \$60 a month to the retirees' pensions.

The government has set up a high-level commission to meet this week to seek “a responsible and sustainable economic formula to respond to the fair aspirations of retirees and pensioners,” according to an EFE report.

## **Guyanese sugar workers hold protest for wage raise, unpaid severance**

As Guyana's National Assembly debated the 2019 budget in Georgetown December 5, sugar workers held a protest action over two main demands: a wage raise and unpaid severance. The protest was called by the Guyana Agricultural Workers Union.

Workers employed at a number of government-run Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) plantations demanded a raise since they have not received one in four years as the cost of living has risen, eroding their purchasing power.

Other workers, who had been retrenched as GuySuCo closed down its Wales facility in 2016, called for severance pay that was promised but either partially paid or not paid yet. GuySuCo claims that it is awaiting a court order clarifying the payments.

## **Massachusetts paratransit drivers strike for living wage**

Paratransit drivers for the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority (BRTA) in Pittsfield, Massachusetts went on strike December 3 demanding a living wage. When 15 drivers who provide service for Berkshire County's sick, elderly and mobility impaired people set up a picket line, bus drivers who provide fixed route service for the BRTA and are members of the same union refused to cross, bringing service for both handicapped and regular commuters to a halt.

The paratransit drivers are members of Teamsters Local 404 and have been without a contract since June. Workers voted down a three-year agreement that called for a 16 percent wage increase for full-time and 19.6 percent increase for part-time drivers.

The workers make between \$11.50 and \$12.50 an hour—half the wages of regular fixed-route drivers—and the increases offered by management barely raise the lowest paid workers past the state's new minimum wage of \$12 an hour.

Paratransit operations are run by a subsidiary of First Transit, a North American public transit company that runs parallel to First Student, which contracts for public school transportation. The two companies are under the Scottish-owned FirstGroup, which has additional operations in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

## **Flight attendants to strike at Flair Airlines**

Flight attendants organized under the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) are scheduled to go strike this week against budget air carrier Flair Airlines, which is based in Edmonton, Alberta.

CUPE has been fighting for a first contract for almost a year for 139 flight attendants at Flair, finally issuing strike notice last week after mediated talks stalled over the issue of the implementation of a two-tier wage structure by the airline. With the company proposing to pay one group of workers 30 per-cent less, other outstanding issues include pensions and work scheduling.

The company has reportedly contacted a number of flight attendants to ask them to work during the strike and have warned passengers of possible flight delays.

## **Toronto flooring company locks out workers**

The Satin Flooring company in Toronto last week locked out 120 workers despite assurances by the Teamsters union that it would not call workers out on strike.

The lock-out is particularly bitter coming just days before Christmas and according to union negotiators accompanies demands by the company to cut wages from \$19 to \$16 an hour and pay an extra \$200 a month more for their benefits. In talks between the two sides, which began over six months ago, the union proposed a number of cost-saving concessions to the company including buyouts and early retirement packages. The company is also seeking concessions on vacations and wants to suspend pension contributions for two years.

## **BC hotel workers walk out**

Workers employed at the Coast Bastion Hotel in Nanaimo, British Columbia held a one-day strike last week in protest over increased workloads and inadequate pensions.

Despite increased occupancy and revenue at the hotel, local union leaders of UNITE HERE say that their membership, which includes all hotel staff excepting management, could be “be falling under minimum wage in the near future” as well as facing deteriorating working conditions.

Negotiations are to resume this week.



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