

Peruvian air traffic controllers strike over COVID safety; Ecuador police fail to end worker occupation of explosives plant

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

Peruvian air traffic controllers hold three-day strike over COVID-19 safety

Air traffic controllers across Peru began a 72-hour strike December 22. The Unified Air Traffic Controllers Syndicate (Suacta) called the strike to press controllers' demands for greater safety measures to prevent or reduce the spread of COVID-19.

The Labor and Employment Promotion Ministry declared the strike "inappropriate" because it "does not conform to the law." The Peruvian Airports and Commercial Aviation Corporation (Corpac) claimed that it had instituted contingency plans to guarantee normal operation, but some delays and cancellations were reported. A Corpac statement asserted that its anti-COVID-19 measures are already sufficient.

The controllers are calling for a private transportation service to be used to ferry them from their homes to airport control centers as well as more testing for operational personnel. Other demands include break rooms and more spaces to rest during night shifts. The rest areas would be altered to accommodate one person instead of two, as is currently the case.

Ecuadorian police try to break up five-month strike and occupation by explosives plant workers

On December 25, a contingent of local police, reinforced by National Police officers, used tools to break locks and barriers set up by striking workers at the Explocen mining explosives plant in San José de Poaló Parrish, Ecuador. Shoving matches ensued; police then fired tear gas, and workers responded by hurling objects.

Workers at the plant have been on strike since July 13. The workers walked out over the company's refusal to agree to a collective contract after seven years of stalling and its firing of workers under the pretext of *force majeure* (unforeseeable circumstances) due to the pandemic.

The striking workers, members of the Ecuadorian Unitary Confederation of Classist Workers Organizations (Cedocut), occupied parts of the plant, set up blockades and locked its entrances with chains and padlocks.

Cedocut, as well as the Alliance of Human Rights Organizations, denounced the police and company for the "miserable outrage." The National Police issued a statement claiming that "despite the peaceful intention of the activity [to allow for the taking of inventory], a group of people committed incidents of disruption of the public order," and claimed that the police did not try to dislodge anybody.

Explocen's investment package is jointly shared by Ecuador's Armed Forces Social Security Institute (60 percent) and Cleveland, Ohio-based Austin Powder (40 percent).

Guyana: Oil workers' strike over pay headed off by government intervention

The chief Ministry of Labour officer ordered workers for the Guyana Oil Company (GuyOil) protesting the lack of payment of a promised wage increase back on the job last week while both sides "go back and review their position."

Workers for the Guyana Oil Company (GuyOil), angered by management's refusal to pay a promised wage increase in 2020, had been threatening to strike. With talks showing no progress, oil workers had reported for work December 23, but instead held a sit-in. The job action followed a tripartite meeting on December 21 at which the Clerical and Commercial Workers' Union (CCWU) proposed an across-the-board raise of 5 percent or 8 percent using a performance-based appraisal system.

The CCWU had received a letter from the board of directors on September 10 affirming the promised wage increase, which it made in negotiations last July. It had also promised a Christmas bonus. Neither promise was put into effect.

When the pandemic struck last spring, the 400 CCWU members, classified as essential workers, continued at their jobs without a break, and GuyOil reported profits of 2.9 billion Guyanese dollars (US\$14.2 million) at their recent annual general meeting. Nonetheless, the company has pled poverty, with board chairman Trevor Bassoo declaring to the *Guyana Chronicle*, "From the inception, consideration has been given to our staff; we value them pretty much more than anything else, so throughout the decision process their well-being has been priority, but it really isn't possible for this year."

Water and sewerage workers in Trinidad protest for sick pay

The office of Trinidad and Tobago's Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) in the northeastern Trinidad city of St. Joseph was the scene of a gathering of daily-paid workers demanding an explanation for why they had not received their yearly sick leave bonus. WASA management had waited until December 15 to announce that the 2020 bonus would be delayed.

The end-of-year bonus has been a customary practice—as well as being part of the collective agreement with the National Union of Government and Federal Workers (NUGFW)—for at least the last 50 years. It is given to workers who use fewer than three of their sick leave days during the year and is considered not only a reward for attendance, but also an assist for meeting workers’ holiday season expenses.

NUGFW President James Lambert told reporters that the sick leave bonus was an entitlement, not a favor, and that WASA should have notified the workers earlier and explained why it was not delivered in a timely manner. He also claimed that “We just want to know exactly what is going on,” after averring, “It was not a protest.”

Trinidadian former petroleum workers hold Christmas morning protest for back pay

As they have done several times before, former employees of Lennox Petroleum Services Ltd (LPSL) demonstrated to demand their back pay. Last week on Christmas morning, the ex-workers, members of the Oilfield Workers’ Trade Union (OWTU), assembled at LPSL’s headquarters in San Fernando before going to the LPSL CEO’s house to picket.

Police arrived shortly afterward and warned the protesters that they would be arrested if they did not leave. After some argument, the protesters dispersed without an incident.

According to the OWTU, some 300 former LPSL employees are owed around US\$9.5 million in back pay. LPSL lawyers have used a variety of tactics to deny them the pay, including assertions that their claims are “factually untrue,” appealing a court decision in the ex-workers’ favor and demanding “clarification of the sums owed under the order since LPSL will have no way to recover any monies if individual workers are overpaid.”

Salvadoran soccer players strike for overdue pay

Players for the Sonsonate soccer team in El Salvador resolved December 24 not to practice until they have been paid overdue wages. The *futbolistas* had gone more than four weeks without their pay, and had asked Miguel Castillo, the interim team president, for at least 15 days’ worth of pay by that date in order to have money to celebrate the holiday. Upon being told by Castillo that it would be “impossible,” the players and their coaches said they would not practice, although they did say that they would show up for a game on December 26.

Castillo claimed that although the board of directors had reneged on their promise to deliver the 15 days of the money owed to the players, their pay would be forthcoming “just a little later.” He called the players’ and coaches’ decision “not very professional.”

United States

Cook County, Illinois, health care workers hold one-day strike over contract

Medical assistants at three hospitals in Illinois’s Cook County Health

System carried out a one-day strike December 22, charging county negotiators with not taking bargaining seriously. The strike by Service Employees International Union Local 73 affected Stroger, Cermak and Provident hospitals and also was joined by a walkout of workers at the county jail and the clerk’s office.

The union claims that the county has walked out of negotiating sessions and refused to set bargaining dates. Workers are demanding pandemic pay, including an additional \$5 an hour for those attending patients in COVID-19 units and additional personal protective equipment. Other workers are pressing for remote work where feasible.

The medical assistants also accuse the hospital of not staffing facilities with sufficient nurses. As medical assistants, the striking workers are unable to perform a number of services such as giving antibiotic shots and mixing medications. When that happens, the patient must be sent home and rescheduled.

Canada

Amazon Canada workers describe horrendous conditions amidst pandemic

Workers at Amazon warehouses across Canada are reporting the breakdown of basic sanitation and regard for workers’ health and safety. This is according to a recent report in the *National Post*.

According to the report, “More than 400 staff have tested positive just at the four facilities in Ontario’s Peel region that surround Pearson International Airport,” outside Toronto.

Workers describe little sanitation, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and inadequate reporting about infections in facilities. This is combined with management intimidation of those who speak out.

“There is no social distancing, there is no sanitation,” said one worker. “Many of them, 99 per cent of them, are scared of working there, but they have no choice.”

This is combined with a relentless drive for productivity. “People outside don’t understand because they are getting their parcels every day,” the worker said. “They don’t understand the slavery that goes into delivering your parcels.”



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