

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Latin America

In an assembly in Santiago, Chile on November 5, members of the LATAM Airlines Pilots Union (SPL) voted by 99 percent in favor of strike action. The vote followed a round of fruitless negotiations with management over the company's refusal to significantly change policies agreed to during the first stages of the pandemic.

As COVID-19 raged through Latin America in 2020, the SPL agreed to an emergency plan that reduced wages by 30 percent and dismissed 240 people. The plan saved the airline over 28 billion Chilean pesos, around US\$30 million. Now pilots are demanding a return to pre-pandemic pay and conditions.

Representatives of LATAM, Latin America's largest air transport company, and the SPL have been in talks since August. The company, which recently gained court approval of a reorganization plan, has refused the union's proposal to return to the former pay arrangement.

The issue is likely to go before the Labor Inspectorate for mediation, a process that can take up to nine days and during which the union will not carry out strike action. If the pilots do walk out, it will be the first time such an action has taken place in 17 years.

Health workers in Argentina's Río Negro province, members of the Public Health Union Association of Río Negro (Asspur), held a 48-hour strike on November 2 and 3 over salary demands. Asspur had held a 24-hour walkout on September 26 to which the governor, Arabela Races, did not respond.

The health workers have complained that their wages are at or below the poverty line, a situation aggravated by inflation. They have also said that a raise that was promised for October's salary was not delivered.

On November 3, a group of health workers went to the city of Bariloche, where Races attended an entrepreneurship celebration in a downtown gym. Beating drums and holding signs saying, "Public health in crisis," "Health crisis" and "Decent wages Now," they blocked traffic and attempted to enter the gym to deliver a petition. For a while, they were held back by a police cordon.

By the time they were able to gain entry, Races had snuck out the back door. The protesters gave the petition to the city's mayor and derisively chanted, "Arabela, Arabela, que asustada se te ve" (Arabela, Arabela, how scared you look").

Following the announcement by Colombia's Finance Ministry that its budget for next year's students at the Metropolitan Technological Institute (ITM) in Medellín will be 13 percent lower than this year's budget, professors, workers and students declared a strike from

November 4 to 9.

The bulk of the investment transfers to ITM are primarily paid to occasional and chair professors, who number about 1,200. Career professors' pay, on the other hand, will rise by about 6 percent. The annual inflation rate for 2022 as of October was over 12 percent and bound to rise even more by the end of the year.

Investment in equipment, supplies, programs and tech upgrades will also suffer. According to an *El Colombiano* report: "This year, between transfers for operation and investment, the ITM received \$70,000 million [US\$13.8 million]. For next year, the Mayor's Office announced \$59,000 million [\$11.6 million], 15 percent less than in real terms, if inflation is taken into account, it will be a reduction of close to 30 percent."

The result will be cuts in free student lunches—affecting about 1,000 students—larger student-to-teacher ratios, postponement of computer updates and purchases as well as cuts in such programs as Systems Engineering, Music and Cinema Production. The striking professors, students and workers announced two conditions for lifting the strike: investment transfers be increased in line with the Consumer Price Index for next year and "a technical criterion be established that sets the budget increases each year of the District's higher education institutions."

Members of the general council of Trinidad and Tobago's Banking, Insurance and General Workers Union (BIGWU) held a protest outside the union's office on November 3 to demand the immediate resignation of President Don Devenish and Deputy President Jason Brown. The protesters accused the two of unilaterally increasing their salaries by 35 percent and 26 percent, respectively, within two months of taking office and without the constitutionally required approval of the council.

General council member Hugo Henry told reporters that Devenish and Brown had given themselves the raises "as their first order of business." He added that "they have already begun to gift themselves ... while we are in an environment of zero, zero, zero with respect to negotiations between the union and the various companies."

Henry said that protests would continue and declared, "We're going to take it as far as possible, whether it be legal action, whatever it is, all action that is within our parameter, we are going to go the full distance to have this stopped immediately."

Hundreds of protesters congregated and marched from Derek Walcott Square in Castries, capital of Saint Lucia, on November 1. The protest, called by the opposition United Workers Party (UWP), took aim at the rising cost of living, crime and the refusal of the Saint Lucia Labour Party (SLP) to deliver on an election promise to give 1,500 Eastern Caribbean dollars (which are linked to the US dollar) in income support to island residents. Other grievances include the abandonment of a hospital project begun before the UWP was ousted in July 2021, and the "giveaway" of two ports to out-of-state concessionaires.

While the participants in the protest voiced legitimate complaints, the UWP, which led the so-called “People’s Protest,” is far from an advocate for workers’ interests. It is a right-wing, pro-business party, whose leader, Allen Chastanet, is managing director of the Coco Palms Hotel.

Chastanet was the prime minister from 2016 until the SLP won a parliamentary “super majority” in 2021 of 13 of 17 assembly seats and six of 11 in the Senate. Under his leadership, the government was aligned with the US in international relations and supported reactionary Venezuelan presidential pretender Juan Guaidó while refusing to recognize the Maduro government.

According to Wikipedia, “His government’s mismanagement of the economy is pointed to by a report from the Central Bank of the Eastern Caribbean, which cites an explosion in debt. Saint Lucia has become the most indebted country in the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States.”

Social service workers staged protests in Nassau, Bahamas on November 2 and 3 to denounce Social Services and Urban Development Minister Obie Wilchcombe for neglecting their needs and demand his resignation. Holding both handmade and printed signs with slogans like, “We need more staff,” “No More Unkept Promises!” and “SOCIAL WORK THE BACKBONE OF SOCIETY,” the workers chanted, “We deserve better!” and “Obie got to go!”

The first protest took place in front of the headquarters of the Bahamas Public Service Union (BPSU) and the next day the workers gathered in front of the House of Assembly. Workers told reporters about staying on the job throughout the pandemic, facing lack of respect from management, hostile clients, denials of promotions, poor pay and inadequate medical insurance, among other complaints.

BPSU President Kimsley Ferguson speechified about expressing workers’ “longstanding” concerns to Wilchcombe, who “advised that he would’ve gotten back to me in about three weeks. Three weeks has now turned into 11 months, 10 months, somewhere there about.” He claimed that there would be further actions.

Ferguson did not mention that just days before, on October 31, a group called People Organizing With Effective Results (POWER) had blasted him for not reaching an agreement with the government and worsening conditions for workers and retirees in the BPSU. One POWER member noted, “The union has not been seeing an increase in almost 10 years, it’s been a steady downfall.” Workers in several agencies have withdrawn from the BPSU under Ferguson and former leader John Pinder.

United States

Archer-Daniels-Midland and the Teamsters union narrowly averted a strike November 1 after workers at the company’s grain-processing plant in Cedar Rapids, Iowa agreed to a new contract. Teamsters Local 238 only said a majority of the nearly 200 workers voted to ratify the new agreement.

The three-year contract calls for a mere 6 percent in wage increases with some additional premium pay for certain classifications. It appears the Teamsters and ADM had to include a \$5,000 ratification bonus in order to get the agreement through. It also includes 40 hours of sick leave and eight hours of personal time off.

ADM ranked 54th among the 2020 Fortune 500 companies and operates 270 plants and 420 crop procurement facilities worldwide. The company’s annual gross profit for 2021 was nearly \$6 billion.

The 300 journalists and other staff at the Thomson Reuters news agency voted by an 81 percent margin to grant strike authorization in the long-stalled negotiations between the News Guild and management. Guild members staged a one-day walkout back in August to protest the slow pace of talks since the old contract expired almost two years ago.

Workers rejected Thomson Reuters’ pathetic current wage offer of between 2 and 3.25 percent. Meanwhile, the company, which is valued at \$50 billion, spent \$2 billion in a share buyback program between June and October 2022. Contract talks are scheduled to resume November 14.

Some 60 workers at the beverage distributor Swire Coca-Cola in Washington state ended their nearly two-month strike after ratifying a new contract. Members of Teamsters Local 760 voted 42 to 3 to ratify the new agreement, which covers workers at facilities in East Wenatchee, Moses Lake and Omak.

According to iFiber One News, the Teamsters settled for half of what workers had been asking for. Swire’s final contract offer proposed a \$3.65 hike for drivers, \$2.75 for merchandisers and \$2.15 for warehouse workers.

Swire, based in London, is the fifth largest bottling partner of Coca-Cola and operates in 13 US states and the United Kingdom. In addition, it has an arm of the company based in Hong Kong and covers Taiwan, most of China, and recently announced it will acquire subsidiaries in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Canada

Some 2,200 GO Transit bus drivers, mechanics, station attendants, safety officers and office personnel, members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1587, went on strike Monday after rejecting a tentative agreement presented to them by their union executive last week. Workers voted down the proposed deal by an overwhelming 81 percent. The union presented the contract without a recommendation to either accept or reject.

The GO Transit system, owned by Crown Corporation Metrolinx, transports passengers throughout the Greater Toronto Area and to destinations as far away as Peterborough, Hamilton, Kitchener and Niagara Falls. The bus system transports about 4.2 million riders a year.

Workers have cited the lack of proper job security and contracting out provisions in the rejected contract as major sticking points, which the company has consistently refused to address.



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