

Peruvian truckers stage protest; Walkout by Argentine agricultural technology institute employees

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

Members of five heavy cargo and urban transport unions held a protest in front of Peru's Transport and Communications Ministry (MTC) November 15. The drivers protested plans by the MTC to withdraw over 2,000 vehicles dating from before 1999.

The National Association for the Integration of Carriers (Anitra) claims that over 2,000 units would be scrapped without any criteria for how truckers, still recovering from the effects of the pandemic and with rising costs of fuel, tolls and taxes, will survive. Anitra leader Enrique Baca told reporters, "The only thing left for them is to pirate and go informal. We do not have a mitigation plan; we do not have a scrap plan."

The unions have called for a two-year extension of the schedule for the renewal of vehicles. A meeting with MTC officials on November 18 failed to reach an agreement, and though, according to Baca, "dialogue is still in force," Anitra has called for a one-day strike on November 22 in Lima and Callao.

Additional demands have been broached at the meetings. Anitra wants the cost of fuels, especially diesel, to be lowered and for dry ports to be established at the borders "to avoid unfair competition with international carriers."

Workers for Argentina's National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA) struck for 24 hours November 17. Mario Romero, general secretary of the INTA Personnel Association (APINTA), told reporters that "we have not had answers to the demands for a salary increase that improves the purchasing power of the workers of the organization."

An APINTA statement pointed out that INTA workers' salaries are 40 percent behind the inflation rate, and that six percent of its workers earn less than the "basic basket" defined by the National Institute of Statistics and Census as the

minimum required income to remain above the poverty line.

Romero declared that 'it is inconceivable that an organization that has national and international recognition and prestige has poor workers.'

APINTA already held a one-day strike on November 7 that did not generate a favorable response from INTA. The union stated that if the Institute continues to ignore its demands, "the plan of struggle will continue with a 48-hour direct action measure, on November 29 and 30, and on December 2 a national day of protest will be held."

Taxi drivers in Barranquilla, Colombia blocked critical roads throughout the city's metropolitan area on November 18. They included arteries leading to the Ernesto Cortissoz Airport and to the city of Santa Marta.

The impetus for the actions was the Mandatory Traffic Accident Third-Party Liability Insurance (SOAT), which was passed into law last year during the administration of Iván Duque. SOAT was supposedly designed to aid victims of traffic accidents and is required of all vehicles.

The insurance has become increasingly difficult to purchase, since it eliminated intermediaries such as supermarkets, service stations and brokers and has to be bought directly from the insurers. However, because of its low profit margin, many insurers have dropped it. As inflation continues its surge, the price of insurance coverage has risen as well.

The drivers' union Sinchotaxis, originally had said that it would not end the strike and blockades until a document was signed by the government committing to resolving the issue. However, after five hours the union lifted the actions and agreed to meet with the District Government Secretariat, Transit Secretariat, Barranquilla Metropolitan Area (AMB), taxi owners and company representatives on November 21.

In addition to the SOAT demand, issues to be discussed at the meeting were "social security for taxi drivers, illegal transport, private cars (platforms) and the measure peak and license plate for private vehicles, among others," according to an *El Heraldo* report.

Taxi and bus drivers struck on November 14 across Jamaica to demand an amnesty for fines resulting from traffic tickets. In some areas, striking drivers blocked roads and burned tires to

disrupt traffic. Several drivers were arrested and charged with criminal damage and public disorder offenses.

Schools on the island were affected differently, with some proceeding with classes normally, others canceling classes or dismissing them early and a few shifting to virtual instruction.

The Office of the Prime Minister adamantly refused to back down from its indifference to the drivers' situation, asserting that it would "give no support for lawlessness and disorder" and denounced the drivers for "complete disdain for law, order and discipline." The media joined in on the denunciations, harping on the loss of production and the strike's effect on education.

The president of the Transport Operators Development Sustainable Services (TODSS), Egerton Newman, said the government's uncompromising stance was adding "fuel to the fire" and claimed that the statement "skirted the issues and is a total disrespect to the transport sector."

By November 15, Transport Minister Audley Shaw agreed to meet with the transport sector representatives and discuss the ticket amnesty issue. Newman, who described the meeting as "cordial," said that TODSS was satisfied with the outcome. He ordered the drivers back to work to "continue to provide the best travel experience to the commuting public and work towards reducing indiscipline in the sector." He did not elaborate on the payment plan, which was scheduled to be presented to the Cabinet on November 21.

United States

Workers at the Woodland Pulp mill in Baileyville, Maine, are demanding increased wages as the final round of bargaining comes up at the end of November. Michael Higgins, a United Steelworkers (USW) representative, told Maine Public Radio that if the company gives the union a final offer at their bargaining session on November 28, "It's going to be a strike or accept vote. And that's serious."

In addition to wage increases, workers are demanding a cost-of-living adjustment as a hedge against inflation. Members of USW Local 27 have been projecting a light onto the company's tissue mill that says, "Fair Contract Now."

Back in March of this year, the USW settled a contract at the Sappi paper mill in Skowhegan, Maine, for an overall 16 percent increase in wages. Pat Carleton, president of USW Local 9 called the settlement for the 463 workers one of the best in the paper mill industry.

Woodland Pulp's operations are limited to Baileyville. Sappi, headquartered in Johannesburg, South Africa, employs 12,800 workers and has both purchased and closed paper mills in several countries, including South Africa, Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. In early November,

it announced record earnings for its fourth quarter.

Negotiators for management and the union representing Louisville, Kentucky's 450 transit workers reached a tentative agreement November 17. Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1447 said the latest two-year contract proposal provides annual wage increases of six percent and four percent, along with increases in workers' tool, shoes and uniform allowances. TARC (Transit Authority of River City) management will continue to pay 95 percent of workers' health care premiums.

Previously, TARC had proposed a mere 7.5 percent increase for drivers and a 9 percent increase for mechanics over the course of three years. Workers voted last month by 95 percent to strike, despite the fact that Kentucky law and the ATU's contract bars strikes and work slowdowns.

Workers will vote on the agreement on November 30.

Canada

On November 12 an explosion at the Tamarack Valley Energy company's Martin Hills oil and gas development facility in northern Alberta killed two contractors. The names of the dead workers have yet to be released, and no any potential cause of the explosion has been made public. Alberta Occupational Health and Safety officials are investigating.

The deaths add to a grim toll in the western Canadian oil and gas fields that has seen 354 workers perish since 2001. In one company alone, Suncor, there have been 12 deaths recorded at corporate facilities just since 2014. Such was the outrage at the abysmal safety record that the Suncor CEO was forced to resign after yet another on-the-job fatality occurred in July, the fourth in less than a year.

The carnage has not been limited to western Canada. This past September, workers at the now refurbishing Come-By-Chance bio-fuel refinery in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland demanded that the company be made criminally responsible for an explosion and flash fire that seriously injured eight workers and subsequently resulted in the death from his injuries of one of the afflicted.



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