

Strikes continue at two universities in Canada's Maritime provinces

## 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

The union at Copa Airlines called off a strike set for February 2 after announcing a deal with management. The Panamanian Commercial Aviators Union (UNPAC) said the agreement includes improved benefits and other measures to offset the decline in the pilots' living standards.

The negotiations had been mediated by Panama's labor ministry, which declared the agreement "promotes the peaceful labor climate the country needs for its economic recovery."

UNPAC did not offer specifics, but called the negotiations "complex." It claimed the agreement was "a fair and sustainable collective agreement with better working and salary conditions." The union said it had achieved benefits for pregnant pilots and pay hikes for Sunday and holiday shifts.

The former head of the National Union of Public Workers (NUPW) in Barbados said he foresees more wildcat strikes by state employees in the island nation. He warned that the labor movement was failing workers and that mounting rank-and-file discontent would lead to unauthorized walkouts.

Walter Maloney said, "Expect to see more and more so-called wildcat strikes emanating from the public service. There is a lot of disquiet within the service ... where persons are coming into the service and being promoted ahead of those already in the service who are qualified as well." His remarks came at a Democratic Labour Party press conference.

In particular, Maloney pointed to strikes at the Sanitation Service Authority and Transport as examples of workers taking action on their own. "These are issues that came up unbeknownst to the union at the time and came out of a sense of anger and a sense of frustration," he said.

He also pointed to a significant decline in union membership in the last 10 years.

In recent talks the NUPW is demanding an 11 percent salary increase while the government has proposed 2 percent.

### United States

School bus drivers for the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District north of Anchorage, Alaska continued their strike last week while the union and the company that contracts with the district agreed to renew negotiations February 3. Some 200 drivers began their strike on January 31 following upon a 98 percent strike authorization earlier in the month, as members of Teamsters Local 959 are seeking better wages and working conditions.

Workers rejected the pay offer of 8 to 14 percent by Durham School Services, the company contracted by the district. Speaking at a school board meeting, a former veteran driver denounced the agreement, which would result in an additional \$2 an hour to the current starting wage of \$13.

The union charged the proposed agreement was inferior to terms agreed to in other districts, such as the nearby Anchorage public schools. The Matanuska-Susitna district signed a 10-year contract with Durham last year after ending a previous engagement with the contractor FirstStudent.

There is widespread anger among drivers and the public over the school board's decision, with charges Durham is incapable of providing safe buses and hiring new drivers given the fact its compensation is below FirstStudent, a notorious low-wage contractor in its own right.

The Matanuska-Susitna district covers a region about the size of the state of West Virginia and has 19,000 students.

The only two full-time workers at the Dollar General store in Irmo, South Carolina went on a two-day strike January 17 after unremitting frustration with the company's failure to

address their complaints about low wages, wage theft, understaffing and a host of dangerous working conditions, such as mold, animal droppings, a blocked fire exit, exposure to dangerous chemicals and extreme heat during the hottest summer months.

They often operate the store alone, having to unload deliveries, stock shelves and operate the cash register while unable to take breaks.

Miranda Chavez told PrismReports.org that she makes a mere \$11 an hour and has yet to receive a promised 75 cent wage increase she was promised. “I’ve never been paid so little, been treated this badly by management, or been lied to about my paycheck. I couldn’t believe that a billion-dollar company can pay their employees so little. Our store is dangerously understaffed because Dollar General is thinking about their bottom line. It seems like they would rather pay OSHA fines than hire enough staff to run the store safely and effectively.”

Some 100 workers and supporters shut down a McDonald’s fast-food restaurant January 26 in Vallejo, California, to protest sexual harassment, wage theft and low wages. Fernando Valencia said he was sexually harassed by a store manager who also forced him to clock in under his own name and the name of a former employee whose record was still on the payroll.

Valencia, who worked seven nights a week, was only given the paycheck under his own name while the manager cashed the paycheck of the former employee for his own benefit. McDonald’s workers as a whole are also angry that the company did not come through with a promised Christmas bonus.

Another employee, Maria Garcia, has not received a wage increase in four years. The *Times-Herald* reported, “Garcia explained that extreme incidents like having coffee thrown in her face or a gun held to her head happen once every few months, but that verbal abuse occurs daily.”

Food service workers for the Hastings, Minnesota, public school district have set a strike date of February 7 unless their demands for better wages, working hours and health care benefits are met. The 35 members of Service Employees International Union Local 284 voted in December to authorize strike action and the union filed a 10-day strike notice on January 30.

Local 284 has been in negotiations since June of last year. The union and the district last met with a state mediator on December 21 and the two sides are not scheduled to meet again until February 22.

A statement by district superintendent Robert McDowell indicated they will be using bagged lunches in an attempt to defeat the strike and the district “will be working with law enforcement to ensure that access to school sites takes

place.”

## Canada

Faculty Association education workers at Cape Breton University in Nova Scotia and Memorial University in Newfoundland are both in their second week of strike action.

In Cape Breton, 200 librarians, advisors, archivists, lab instructors, researchers and nursing instructors are fighting for wage increases that will protect them against continuing high inflation rates. The university administration has offered only 8 percent over the course of a new three-year contract. Workers have refused to accept what amounts to a real wage cut and have countered with a demand for a 14 percent raise over a two-year deal.

In St. John’s, Newfoundland, 850 Memorial University faculty educators, counselors and librarians are demanding similar protections against the erosion of their wages through inflation. Strikers have projected that the inflationary spike reduces their actual buying power by 18 percent. They are demanding a 15 percent increase over the course of a four-year contract. The educators are already one of the lowest paid faculties in all of Canada. The university administration is offering a paltry eight percent over the life of a four year deal.

Additionally, strikers are demanding that the more precarious workers in their ranks—who try to survive on contracts lasting as short as four months and no longer than one year—receive more reliable job-security terms in longer, more robust contracts. All the St. John’s strikers are united in opposing attempts by the administration to impose a two-tier pension system.



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