

Mexico's Aeromar ceases operations provoking strike; Canada Liberals seek pay cuts for 300,000 federal workers

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

Mexican airline Aeromar announced February 15 that it would be shutting down operations after 35 years in business. The next day, the company's workers, including flight attendants, pilots and ground crew, struck Aeromar's facility at the Mexico City International Airport (AICM).

The striking workers demanded the payment of overdue pay and benefits, which, according to the Aviation Flight Attendants Union Association of Mexico, adds up to at least 105 million pesos (US\$5.71 million). The Aviation Pilots Union Association estimates Aeromar's debt to the pilots as 120 million pesos (US\$6.53 million).

At a recent press conference, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador ended any hopes for government aid, claiming, "It is totally unfeasible economically, commercially. It is not possible to rescue something that has a very high liability; they even owe the rental of the planes, they have no assets, they owe fuel." In addition to its debts to the workers, Aeromar owes 500 million pesos (US\$27 million) to the AICM and one billion pesos (US\$54 billion) to the Tax Administration Service.

The Labor Ministry has been in contact with Aeroméxico, Viva Aerobus and Volaris, saying that they would take advantage of "the experience and talent of workers who wish to continue working to integrate them into their workforces." This confirmation is cold comfort for the Aeromar employees, since the first airline is currently being "restructured," while the latter two are "low-cost" companies. Even if Aeromar workers manage to obtain jobs in the aforementioned, they can expect to be lowballed with inferior pay and benefits.

Workers at Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital (KMH) in Belize City, Belize began working under protest February 15. The workers, members of the Workers' Union, were instructed to show up in shorts and t-shirts. Workers' Union president Andrew Baird told reporters that the reason for the breaking of the dress code is to emphasize the shortages of supplies, equipment and human resources, as well as poor working conditions.

KMH workers also held a protest in front of the hospital that day. However, the employees continued to provide full services. Meanwhile, union and management reps have continued meeting, but no progress has been made over the issues, which have festered for months. While KMH CEO Chandra Nisbet Cansino claimed that she would not make an issue of the casual clothes protest, one incident of a worker being "anecdoted" by a supervisor for wearing a union t-shirt was noted by Baird.

The union accused management of union busting, a charge Cansino

denied. While professing the best of intentions, she added that management already had a "contingency plan" in place in case of a strike, an option that Baird has not yet publicly entertained.

A group of residents of Bermuda calling itself "One and a Half Bags" held a protest February 14 against the surging cost of groceries. The protesters congregated at the MarketPlace in Hamilton, the capital, and carried protest signs that read, "The Lord Giveth, merchants taketh away," and "Greed destroys the need, sharing meets the need," and other slogans.

The name of the group refers to the fact that residents are finding it more and more difficult to afford enough to eat. Organizer Fern Wade told Bernews, "I buy food for my mother, and she can only get a half a bag; she can't afford more than half a bag. So that's where the name came from."

One of the group's demands is that certain essential food items should be regularly discounted.

The protests continued for the rest of the week at shopping centers and supermarkets throughout the week. More protests were planned for this week.

Maintenance workers for the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) walked off the job on February 16 and blocked entry to 10 of its 11 campuses. Some 1,000 cleaning, maintenance and decoration workers are members of the UPR Workers Union. They had voted unanimously for strike authorization in January, but the union continued with fruitless talks with the administration until mid-February.

The main demand is a wage raise. Currently, the minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour (Puerto Rico's currency is the US dollar). The union is calling for an immediate raise to \$8.25, to be increased to \$9.50 in July. This last amount is still abysmally low, with inflation eating up paychecks. Moreover, the ruling class has been unloading the massive debt burden incurred by the privatization of the electrical system on the working class through rate increases.

The other demand is reversal of the 2021 consolidation of the medical plan, which was touted by the administration as a way to save money. According to union president David Muñoz Hernández, for the workers, the savings never materialized. He further stated to the *San Juan Daily Star*, "What the administration has done is deprive workers of the uniform payment, decrease the Christmas bonus, eliminate the tuition waiver and the payment of excess sick leave as workers earn \$7.25 an hour, which is a miserable salary considering inflation and the high cost of living in Puerto Rico."

UPR President Dr. Luis Ferrao Delgado, while calling for continued "dialogue," cited the Supplementary Rules and Conditions of Work of the Workers' Union to declare the strike illegal. He also expressed confidence that with the UPR's latest budget request, if approved by the Financial Oversight and Management Board, "we can do the necessary wage justice." This is the unelected board that has imposed a raft of draconian austerity measures on the working class since 2016.

Protesters in Suriname converged on the capital Paramaribo on February 17 to protest rampaging inflation and the policies of the coalition government of President Chandrikapersad “Chan” Santokhi, who was elected in 2020. Estimates of their numbers ranged from 1,000 to 2,000.

According to Reuters, “Suriname, a former Dutch colony in northern South America with a population of 610,000, reported inflation of 54.6% for 2022.” Recently, in accordance with International Monetary Fund (IMF) “restructuring” plans, the government announced that it would begin eliminating subsidies for fuel, water and electricity and add a new sales tax. However, the IMF will not release the funds—equaling US\$690 million—until the conditions are fully met.

At one point, a group of protesters broke through police lines and barricades and tried to enter the National Assembly building. A clash with police broke out, with rocks and bottles pitted against rubber bullets and tear gas. Outside, incidents of looting and vandalism occurred. The next day, a government statement said, “Vigorous action will be taken against those who instructed, carried out, and caused these attacks.”

United States

About 130 sanitation workers in Camden County, New Jersey, went on strike February 1 against Waste Management over wages and benefits. Teamsters Local 115 has been negotiating with the giant trash and recycling company since last summer but negotiations have stalled.

“It’s like we’re out on an island,” 11-year worker Joe Gallagher told WPVI. “No communication with us. We were faithful to this company through a pandemic and here we are, just wanting to negotiate.”

Waste Management’s response has been to fly in replacement workers in an effort to break the strike. In a press release, the company declared, “[W]e have plans in place to ensure collection services continue with minimal short-term service disruptions or delays...”

Waste Management, along with its competitor Republic Services, control more than half of all garbage collection in the United States. CEO James Fish Jr.’s net worth was estimated at \$91 million in 2023.

Negotiations between United Airlines and its flight attendants are at a standstill since the current labor agreement became amendable in August 2021. According to the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), the two sides have only completed one section of the contract out of 34 during the current bargaining.

Flight attendants want to register gains on a host of issues such as wages, hours, holiday pay, profit sharing, health care, pensions and a large number of rules that govern their work.

The current bargaining unit is the largest contingent of flight attendants, numbering 25,000. They comprise units merged into United from Continental and Continental Micronesia.

According to the AFA, 91 percent of its members feel undervalued in their jobs, and 99 percent claim there are unresolved issues affecting their work. Many point to the lack of parity on certain issues with non-union Delta flight attendants.

Teamsters Local 104 has resorted to an appeal to the Arizona House of Representatives to ask Republic Services, the giant waste management corporation, to come to a first-time agreement with the 113 trash haulers in Phoenix who voted to unionize back in October 2022. Some 22 out of the House’s 60 members signed a meaningless letter to company CEO Jon Vander Ark asking him to respect labor law and negotiate a “fair” labor contract.

Vander Ark pulled down \$15 million in compensation during 2022. The Phoenix-based Republic workers are demanding increased pay and health care along with improved working conditions. One in three of these

workers reported being injured on the job.

Over the course of 2022, Republic earned over \$1.5 billion in profits. During the years of the pandemic from 2019 to 2021, it engaged in \$2.3 billion in stock buybacks. Microsoft founder Bill Gates holds 34 percent of the company and is its largest shareholder.

Canada

Negotiations between Canada’s Liberal government and unions bargaining on behalf of 300,000 federal government workers remain largely stalled, as the government seeks to impose concessionary agreements containing large real-wage cuts.

Last week, the Treasury Board warmly welcomed the final report of a Public Interest Commission (PIC), established after the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) declared an impasse in its negotiations with Ottawa for new contracts for 120,000 “core” federal administration workers.

The government termed the PIC report a “clear path forward” for resolving the dispute. In reality, it recommended wage “increases” well below the annual inflation rate, which surpassed 8 percent last year and continues to exceed 6 percent. The PIC proposed pay hikes totaling just 9 percent in a three-year contract, for an annual average hike of 3 percent. This would be comprised of increases of 1.5 percent retroactive to June 2021 (the previous contract expired that month), 4.5 percent in June 2022, and 3 percent in June of the current year.

The ostensibly “progressive,” trade-union and New Democratic Party-backed Liberal government had previously tabled contract offers in line with those of the hard-right governments of Ontario and Quebec. For the four bargaining units that comprise the “core” federal administration workers, the government offered average annual pay “increases” of 2.06 percent in a four-year contract.

Throughout the lengthy negotiations, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government have adopted a hard line. In January, the government initiated an “unfair labour practices” complaint before the Federal Public Sector Labour Relations Board accusing PSAC of “flood(ing) the bargaining tables with costly proposals” and refusing to negotiate in “good faith.”

Despite the PIC’s pro-government stance, the PSAC leadership also welcomed its report. A PSAC press release said it “offers a pathway to make gains for workers, but still falls short of PSAC’s demands to reach a fair contract that keeps up with the rising cost of living.”



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