Pilots at American and Southwest Airlines consider strike action; UNIFOR claims ratification of CN Rail agreement

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 May 2023

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

Rural homeless workers occupy lands and buildings in Brazil's Bahía state

Members of the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST) occupied the FERBASA iron works factory in Maracás, Bahía state. The protest occupation was triggered by the expulsion of rural families in the Planaltino municipality in the Chapada Diamantina region of Bahía state from FERBASA-owned land.

FERBASA had agreed in 2017 to hand over unused acreage to homeless families. That never happened.

Widespread protests in Ecuador mark May Day 2023

On May 1, thousands of workers protested in 61 cities across Ecuador, demanding better working conditions, job security and health benefits. Many workers carried signs demanding the resignation of President Guillermo Lasso.

Lasso faces an impeachment vote launched by opposition lawmakers over accusations of embezzlement before he took office as president, while he was vice president under Rafael Correa.

Peruvian workers mobilize on May Day against Baluarte dictatorship

Peruvian workers mobilized in Perú on May 1, International Workers Day, demanding democracy, the protection of their rights and the end of the Dina Baluarte dictatorship. In Lima workers defied prohibition of protests and marched in the historic city center. Among the organizations represented in the protests in Lima were the General Labor Confederation and the Educators Union.

Speakers at the rally denounced the conditions that workers face, including the explosion of contingent, informal employment and zero-hour contracts.

University of Venezuela workers and retirees protest march attacked by police

On May 4, university workers, retirees and their supporters rallied at the campus of the University of Venezuela in Caracas. At issue was the decision by the Maduro administration not to raise the minimum wage (currently at US $5.00 a month). As the demonstrators took to the streets, they were savagely attacked by 200 police attempting to stop them. A street battle took place in which at least one worker was injured and had to be taken to a clinic.

The protesters chanted: "You shall not take our right to protest!" and "What revolution? This is a government of hunger, misery and corruption." Other workers pointed out that the Maduro government "has stolen our Christmas bonus, our social benefits, our holidays!"

Inflation has reduced the value of workers' wages and benefits to the lowest levels in Venezuela's history.

Pilots at American and Southwest Airlines consider strike action

American Airlines pilots voted by a 99 percent margin to grant strike authorization, while pilots at Southwest Airlines are considering the same action. The Allied Pilots Association (APA), which represents the 15,000 American Airlines pilots, is seeking increased wages and better working conditions in the wake of the pandemic.

If Southwest Airlines pilots move ahead with a strike authorization vote, it will be the first in their history. Southwest's scheduling software experienced a major crash in December 2022. In a recent union protest, Southwest Airlines Pilots Association President Casey Murray glossed over the many complaints of pilots in a statement to Simple Flying: "We're not picketing because of pay. We're not picketing because of retirement. We're picketing because of the operational disaster that Southwest has become."

Minnesota health care workers vote to strike Allina Health

Some 500 health care workers for the Allina Health system in the metro region of Minneapolis, Minnesota, voted by over 98 percent on May 4 to launch a seven-day Unfair Labor Practices strike after some 90 bargaining sessions and more than a year of fruitless negotiations.

The strike, which will begin on May 15, involves a variety of workers

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including technicians, scientists, therapists, lab workers and mental health workers. They are represented by the health care division of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and work at the Abbott Northwestern, Mercy and Unity Campus hospitals, as well as at the Allina Central Lab.

In a press release, Becca Erickson, a medical laboratory scientist for eight years at the Allina Central lab and a bargaining team member, declared, “Even as we’ve dealt with a global pandemic, Allina eliminated our wage increase and for a time cut our 401K contributions. We didn’t get any hazard pay during COVID like others did. We are already underpaid, and these moves hurt even more. These moves make us feel undervalued, and it’s hard to bring people in.”

Workers also want Allina to restore the accrual rate for Personal Time Off (PTO). With the advent of the pandemic, the company cut PTO and also reduced the amount that can be carried over from year to year.

The union charges that Allina’s wage proposal will leave high-seniority workers without a wage increase for three years. To further provoke divisions among workers, the company is currently paying new hires 5-6 percent more than current workers.

Para-transit drivers in Orange County, California, go on strike

Para-transit drivers for the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) in California went on strike May 3 after the subcontractor Transdev proposed a mandatory 50-hour work week, a 2.5-hour unpaid lunch break and the right to subcontract work. Teamsters Local 952 represents the 250 striking drivers, while another 100 mechanics, dispatchers, cleaners and fuelers represented by the Teamsters are honoring their picket lines.

Teamsters official Norma Lopez said the 2.5-hour unpaid lunch period means “our members now are having to work maybe 12 hours a day, 12.5 hours and only getting paid for 10. They’re stuck in the field wherever they are, and in the state of California, you’re no longer allowed to idle so that means during the summer heat, they’re going to be stuck in that bus in a sauna basically, and in the winter time when it’s cold and freezing because the climate has changed in Southern California, they can’t run the heater...”

The drivers provide transportation to people with physical or cognitive limitations preventing them from using the regular transport services. Transdev is a French-based corporation operating in 17 countries. In 2020 it had revenues of just under $8.2 billion.

CN Rail workers ratify agreement

Around 3,000 workers employed by Canadian National Rail (CN Rail) ratified a new two-year agreement on April 28. The workers are represented by UNIFOR Local 100 and Council 4000. They include skilled trades workers in machine shops, as well as clerical staff, mechanics and excavator operators.

The union has refused to publicly release any information about the contract. In a florid statement published after its ratification, UNIFOR President Lana Payne claimed that the contract delivered “important improvements in wages, benefits, and job security.”

The two sides had previously engaged in a series of negotiations which supposedly broke down several times, leading UNIFOR to file for conciliation in December of last year. Workers had voted 97 and 98 percent to strike, but the UNIFOR executive rejected that strike mandate.

For many years, UNIFOR and the other major railroad union, the Teamsters, have sought to divide the railroad workforce and prevent united strike action, including with American railroad workers, who were poised to strike in the fall of last year. They have orchestrated a series of sellout contracts, including in 2015, 2019 and 2022.

Casino Woodbine workers locked out after rejecting tentative agreement

Around 1,000 casino workers at Casino Woodbine in Ontario were locked out by their employer, One Toronto Gaming, after rejecting the latter’s contract offer. The workers, including table dealers, cleaning and maintenance staff, and cashiers, are represented by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) Local 533.

While neither the union nor the company have released any details about the tentative agreement, PSAC Local 533 President Theo Lagakos said the major issue is guaranteed work hours. At least half of the workforce are employed part-time, working fewer than three shifts per week.

PSAC recently shut down a massive strike of over 100,000 federal government workers, forcing them back to work without ratifying a sellout contract that meets none of the striking workers’ main demands.

Halifax Education Support Workers Reject Tentative Agreement

More than 1,800 workers in Halifax, Nova Scotia, rejected an insulting tentative agreement that was negotiated between their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 5047, and their employer, the Halifax Regional Centre for Education.

The proposed contract included wage increases of just 6.5 percent over three years, little more than 2 percent per year under conditions of skyrocketing inflation. Local 5047 President Chris Melanson told CBC News that the tentative agreement was rejected by “an overwhelming representation of the members.”

Neither Melanson nor other Local 5047 executives have explained why they brought such a miserable offer to their membership in the first place.

CUPE appeals to corporate donors to boycott Toronto Metropolitan University

The union representing 110 custodians, maintenance staff and groundskeepers at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) are asking the school’s corporate and wealthy donors to “boycott” the school as a strategy for winning workers’ ongoing job action.

The striking workers are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 233. Explaining the rationale behind their latest gimmick, the Local 233 executives wrote in a press release that donors include a “number of progressive foundations and individuals who will be very concerned to learn about the details behind [our] strike.”

TMU, like virtually all post-secondary institutions, receives donations from corporate and wealthy “philanthropists” because they lead to handsome tax deductions, improved public relations and the opportunity for Bay Street moguls to shape school curricula in their right-wing image.

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In addition, decades of budget cuts by federal and provincial governments have led to the majority of school funding coming from ever-increasing tuition fees and corporate investments.

What CUPE has defined as a “strike” is actually merely a work-to-rule campaign, in which its members continue their contractual work duties.

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