

Workers Struggles: The Americas

Costa Rican workers and students protest fiscal “reforms;” Sun-Maid workers continue strike in California

18 September 2018

Latin America

Costa Rican workers and students strike, protest tax reform plan

Members of Costa Rican public sector and other unions and social groups, as well as students from the University of Costa Rica (UCR), carried out nationwide strikes and protests last week against a fiscal “reform” package being discussed in the nation’s national legislature. The plan, which the government claims is necessary to stop the growth of the national deficit, contains a number of anti-worker measures.

The most hated of those is the replacement of the sales tax with a value added tax, which would end exemptions for some products and would tax services in addition to goods. Another proposal that has met bitter opposition would end tax exemptions on basic foodstuffs. Still others would cut unemployment assistance and some bonuses.

The strikes and protests began on September 10 in various locales. When workers in the Caribbean region of Limón walked out and some attempted to block access to the RECOPE national oil refinery, police broke up the attempted blockade and arrested some protesters. In the capital San José, thousands of protesters carrying signs with “Let the rich and the big capitalists pay,” “I’m fighting for my kids’ food and future” and similar slogans marched to the presidential residence and Legislative Assembly building.

On the third day, September 12, riot police broke up blockades and prevented marchers from entering the Assembly building, and attacked a group of UCR students as well as a journalist who was covering the protest. President Carlos Alvarado has used sporadic acts of vandalism to call the strike illegal and denounce protesters as “delinquents.” On the 14th, the unions declared the strike indefinite until the government agrees to talk with them, while the government says it would not negotiate as long as the strike continues.

Meanwhile, as AP has reported, “Despite the pressure, the measure has advanced apace in the Legislative Assembly.”

Jamaica technical university lecturers hold sit-in, sickout over funding, salary issues

Lecturers at the University of Technology (UTech) in Papine, St Andrew, Jamaica held a sit-in protest on September 11. The lecturers had held a meeting on the 10th and made the decision to refuse to work to protest the lack of funding for the institution.

Another complaint of the lecturers is the failure of UTech to deliver on a salary raise promise going back to 2007. The Ministries of Finance and Education did not respond to their requests to implement the agreement to put the raise in effect, so the lecturers say they will call in sick until they get a response.

Dominican Republic: Drivers protest rise in fuel prices

Urban transport drivers held a four-hour walkout and protest on September 12 against fuel price rises. The drivers protested along a busy intersection, halting traffic. Police sent to the location fired shots into the air and launched tear gas at the drivers. At least ten people were injured by buckshot.

Transport Workers National Central (CNTT) president Juan Marte complained in an interview that, due to corruption and diversions, money earmarked for fuel subsidies and operations never reaches the workers. He also denounced the recent announcement of a 5-peso (US\$0.10) increase in the bus fare by the National Transport Federation (Conatra) business group, saying that there had been no increase in wages for workers.

Argentine public health workers decide on 24-hour strike over salaries, job insecurity

Public health sector workers at the Samic Hospital, El Calafate, Santa Cruz Province, Argentina decided September 12 to stop work for 24 hours. The one-day walkout was called to press their demands for higher wages and the end of job insecurity, which takes the form of temporary contracts and little likelihood of being taken on as full-time permanent workers.

Meanwhile, the State Workers Association of Calafate called for a strike on the same day to push its own demands: correct payment of salaries with respect to salary parity, delivery of overdue contributions to retirement and union funds since the beginning of 2018, guarantees

of labor stability and fair wages in the 2019 budget.
The United States

Sun-Maid Raisins workers walk out in California

On Monday, September 10, more than 500 workers at the Sun-Maid Raisins plant in Kingsbury, in California's Central Valley, walked off their jobs and shut down the factory for two days, before management re-opened the plant using strikebreakers. Last Wednesday, the plant was reopened with a skeleton crew of less than one hundred nonunion workers.

The Sun-Maid workers are demanding higher wages, a better healthcare plan, and more contributions to their pensions. The striking workers are members of the Teamster Union (IBT Local 431).

On August 8, Sun-Maid and the Teamsters reached a tentative three-year agreement that coupled a fifty-cent yearly wage increase with substantial givebacks on health care benefits.

Despite the Teamsters' full endorsement of the deal, on August 12 the membership voted it down. On August 20, the company unilaterally imposed the agreement. Last Monday, 250 of the 500 workers began picketing the plant.

Previous contracts between at the plant included full employer-paid health coverage for workers, after deductibles of \$1,200 and \$2,700 for individual and family plans, respectively.

Workers will now have to pay \$70 a month for individual plans and \$80 for family plans, effectively canceling the first year's wage increase, while leaving in place the same high deductibles.

In addition to the health care dispute, workers at the plant denounced the fifty-cent-an-hour wage increase as too small. Most Sun-Maid workers are paid \$14 per hour.

Included among the strikers at the Sun-Maid plant are many veteran workers with greater needs for health care, and whose families rely on them for their health care.

In response to the walkout, Teamsters Local 431 leadership has launched a campaign of damage control, including picketing by Dolores Huerta of the Farm Workers Union, support from the CTA and other Teamster locals.

United Technologies workers strike Connecticut facility

Some 188 workers at United Technologies Cheshire, Connecticut operations were set to strike Monday in a contract dispute after workers rejected a management contract proposal. Management has vowed to keep the facility open despite the strike.

The main issue in the fight is the company's demand for significant concessions on health care. According to officials of the International Association of Machinists, wages would actually drop under management's proposal.

UTC workers make less than those employed at the company's Pratt & Whitey and Hamilton Standard locations. IAM officials said the company "cramped their substandard health care plan down the workers throats."

Canada

Cafeteria workers gear up for strike at University of Northern British Columbia

Workers at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) who are employed by Chartwells, a subsidiary of food service giant Compass Group Canada, could be on strike as early as next week after returning an overwhelming strike mandate to their union, UNITE HERE.

Chartwells' contract with the school, which is situated in Prince George, expires at the end of the current school year and union negotiators are seeking assurances that jobs will not be eliminated when that happens. In addition to job security the union says that they are fighting against persistently low wages that are well below what their counterparts at other universities in B.C. are paid and leave their members living at or below the poverty line.

Unionized dining hall workers and workers at the in-house Tim Hortons at UNBC have been working without contract for over a year.

Strike looms at Canada Post

Mail carriers across the country at Canada Post—a Crown corporation—could be on strike or locked out as early as September 26 if a new deal is not reached before then.

The 50,000 workers are members of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW). According to CUPW, over 94 percent of workers voted in favor of strike action earlier this month in support of a fight for better wages, job security and working conditions. The union is asking for a 3.5 per-cent annual wage increase and guaranteed minimum hours but Canada Post is only offering 1.5 per-cent in a four year contract without guaranteed hours. In addition CUPW is seeking to have the wages of urban and suburban carriers brought in line with city carriers.

The two sides have been working with an arbitrator since June and the government is proposing mediation to avoid a work stoppage such as the last one in 2011 when Canada Post locked workers out before they were legislated back to work.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact