

Workers Struggles: The Americas

Public workers protest in Venezuela; Canada Post workers continue rotating strikes

30 October 2018

Venezuela: Public workers demand a living wage in Caracas

Last Thursday, thousands of public sector workers marched and rallied in the Venezuelan capital, Caracas, to protest the assault on their wages and working conditions, part of the politics of austerity directed against the Venezuelan working class by the Maduro administration.

The protest brought together transit workers, labor ministry employees, university and education workers, health and hospital workers, and workers in the oil industry. Earlier this month, Maduro raised the monthly minimum and food subsidies for the third time in 2018 to 2.5 million bolivars, the equivalent at that time of US\$30. Due to inflation, the monthly minimum is now the equivalent of US\$9 in the black market. The daily rate of inflation in Venezuela is 4 percent.

The workers carried signs demanding wages that keep up with inflation and an end to corporate assaults on their working conditions. “Mr. President, we invite you to live on what we earn,” said one banner. The marchers rallied at the Labor Ministry, which was surrounded by police barricades with a heavy police presence.

Workers’ protests are on the rise in Venezuela, as the Maduro administration undertakes harsher austerity measures. On October 5, there were labor mobilizations across Venezuela demanding higher wages and denouncing the collapsing infrastructure that has led to electricity blackouts and shortages of essential medicines and foods.

On Thursday, workers on strike for two weeks against Cugat supermarkets picketed in Rancagua, at the firm’s corporate offices. The issue is wages.

The Cugat employees earn about US\$400 per month, with no other benefits except for a bonus that can only be used in the supermarket.

Workers are also denouncing sanitary conditions in the supermarkets that affect their health and those of the customers. The pickets called on workers entering the stores to support their strike by boycotting the supermarket chain.

Workers at Argentine dough factory rally over wages

On October 25, workers at the General Mills La Salteña plant in Burzaco, an industrial suburb of Buenos Aires, rallied at the plant demanding a wage reopener. The Burzaco plant is a leading manufacturer of refrigerated dough, used in the production of many baked goods.

In April, the pastry union negotiated a 20 percent wage increase, less than the prior year’s inflation, for the La Salteña workers. Since then, inflation rates have more than doubled, particularly for those things that workers need the most—food, fuel and utilities.

The La Salteña workers are demanding a wage reopener to keep up with Argentina’s inflation, currently expected to reach 50 percent by year’s end.

Striking supermarket workers protest in Rancagua, Chile

Strike ends at Connecticut aerospace manufacturer

Some 190 aerospace workers ended a three-week strike

earlier this month against United Technologies Corporation (UTC) in Cheshire, Connecticut, and returned to work. The International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 62A did not immediately release details involving a new five-and-a-half-year contract that replaced a previous three-year agreement.

Workers originally voted by a two-thirds margin to strike and walked off the job on September 17. At that time, workers rejected a 25-cents-an-hour pay increase that did nothing to cover rising health care costs.

Cheshire workers, who average \$19.95 an hour, are paid far less than some of the 41,000 workers at other UTC plants. On October 19, UTC announced it would lay off 300 workers at its Chula Vista, California, plant where workers average \$32 an hour.

UTC, which raked in profits of \$2.4 billion last year on sales of \$14.7 billion, will soon be carrying through a \$30 billion merger with Rockwell Collins, an Iowa avionics manufacturer. The new company will be called Collins Aerospace Systems.

Canada Post workers continue rotating strikes

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) is continuing its strategy of one-day rotating strikes across the country that began last week, hitting a small number of cities each day.

Last week, the giant Gateway facility just outside Toronto was shut for two days by the job action, slowing delivery of around 70 percent of parcel deliveries in Canada. While union leaders say they are fighting against deteriorating working conditions, increased workloads and an increase in workplace injuries, a central issue in a new contract is equal pay for rural and suburban carriers. A two-tier wage scale imposed in 2011 imposed sharply lower pay for new hires.

CUPW strategy is based on accepting the premise that Canada Post must be run as a for-profit enterprise and separates the fight against privatization from a broader struggle to defend public services.

Nova Scotia equipment operators on strike

Members of the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) at over 25 construction sites across Halifax, Nova Scotia, walked off the job last week after voting nearly unanimously in favor of strike action.

The dispute involves around 85 crane operators and 25 heavy equipment operators in the same local who are governed by contracts with the Nova Scotia Construction Labour Relations Association (NSCLRA) that expired earlier this year. The IUOE is asking for 1.5 percent wage increases in a new contract but are only being offered 1 percent by the employers.

The strike will last a maximum of 21 days, after which it goes to binding mediation according to the rules agreed to by union leaders.

One-day strike at Quebec liquor stores

After giving their union, the Syndicat des employés de magasins et de bureaux de la SAQ (SEMB SAQ), a mandate for 18 more days of strike action last month, 5,500 workers at government liquor stores across Quebec staged a one-day strike last Friday as part of ongoing job action.

Workers employed by the Société des alcools du Québec (SAQ), the provincially owned liquor store chain, have carried out a series of one-day walkouts since July, when their union launched a campaign to pressure government for a new contract after the last one expired in March of this year.

Both sides are scheduled to hold three days of talks this week to resolve outstanding issues covering weekend work and provisions for part-time workers who make up the vast majority of SAQ staff.

The job action that affects more than 50,000 workers nationally has prompted the federal government to appoint a special mediator, even though union leaders have insisted that they want to minimize the impact of the strikes on the public.



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