

Protest in Panama against premature reopening in face of spreading COVID-19

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Panamanian workers protest reopening of economy

Workers belonging to various Panamanian trade unions held street protests June 2 to protest the government's plans to reopen the economy. The decision, beginning with the June 1 reopening of the construction industry, was taken despite the fact that Panama has had 13,000 infections and 350 deaths, the worst record of any Central American nation.

The government decreed a shutdown in mid-April, and the weeks that followed were rife with complaints that the promised aid and food distribution were irregular and insufficient. The unions called for a more gradual easing of restrictions to ward off a spike in new infections.

The protest included a march through Panama City in which members of the Suntracs construction union carried a mock coffin. The march ended at the Labor Ministry, where Suntracs Secretary General Saúl Méndez denounced the decision, saying, "It's like throwing everything the people have suffered into the trash." The unions also accused the government of working with employers to weaken labor laws.

Mexican hotel workers strike to demand employment stability

Some 50 workers for the San Francisco Hotel Inn in Tlaxcala, capital of the Mexican state of the same name, formally initiated a strike June 5, draping the customary red and black flags across the entrance of the building.

The workers, who had stayed at home during the first months of the pandemic, were notified June 1 and told to return to their usual shifts. When they showed up, all the doors were locked and there was no activity apparent. The workers were unable to get any response from management.

A spokeswoman for the workers told reporters that they decided on the strike because of uncertainty about their jobs and, on attending a hearing before the Conciliation and Arbitration Board, their employer made no concrete proposal. The majority of workers have been employed over 10 years at the hotel.

The striking workers have set up an encampment with picket signs and say that they will not leave until they get responses to their demands.

Costa Rican banana workers strike over COVID-19 concerns

Workers for Finca 3, a banana plantation in Carari, a district in Costa Rica's Pococí canton, went on strike June 5, the day before four workers were found to have contracted COVID-19 and were removed from the premises. The workers also complained that management had not placed adequate sanitary supplies and lavatories at all sites.

The workers had asked the Labor Ministry to intervene, but apart from a promise, it has done nothing so far.

Dominican dump-truck drivers strike to demand overdue pay

Drivers for the Duquesa Municipal Landfill near the Dominican Republic capital Santo Domingo stopped work the morning of June 5 to demand their wages, which they have not received for over a month. Dozens of parked trucks lined the road to the entrance.

In January, President Daniel Medina decreed a "technical closure" of Duquesa, which has not happened yet. The announcement caused consternation among "divers," informal workers who scour the dump every day to collect recyclable materials. Some 5,000 divers, who consider 30,000 pesos (US\$520) per month to be a good income, scrape by at Duquesa.

Duquesa was the scene of a fire, which the government claims was started by "criminal hands," that began April 27 and lasted more than a week. The Santo Domingo residents, known as *capitaleños*, have suffered from respiratory, throat and other maladies resulting from the smoldering smoke cloud produced by the fire, and which still hangs over the city.

Colombian teachers hold sit-ins to demand health resources, basic income, change in plans to reopen schools

Groups of no more than 50 teachers in Bogotá, Cali, Medellín and Bucaramanga held sit-ins on the streets to dramatize their demands June 4. The teachers' union federation, Fecode, organized the actions in line with biosafety protocols including social distancing and the wearing of gloves and masks, stating that other teachers were staying at home but in virtual support of the protests.

The teachers protested the model—known as "alternation and gradualness"—drawn up by the Education Ministry for the restarting of face-to-face instruction. Classes have been suspended since mid-March,

and the ministry is aiming to restart them on August 1. Fecode rejects the scheme “because there are no biosafety conditions and teachers, students and parents are at risk,” stated a Fecode spokesman.

Other issues were highlighted at the sit-ins. Fecode restated its support for a proposal in the Senate to provide a monthly minimum wage of 877,803 pesos (US\$245) to unemployed and self-employed workers who have been thrown out of work by the pandemic. It also demanded that the distribution of health resources be better managed.

Uruguayan protesters denounce job losses, demand aid

Thousands of workers protested in Uruguay’s capital Montevideo June 4 during a four-hour strike called by the Uruguayan PIT-CNT union federation. The protesters gathered at the Legislative Palace to denounce the hundreds of thousands of layoffs carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Urgent Consideration Law (LUC) promoted by President Luis Lacalle Pou, which was passed ostensibly to help the economy, but which PIT-CNT called “regressive” and “an unfortunate, unconstitutional law that was a bad bet because as well it doesn’t attend to the real urgency of the people.” Politicians of the PIT-CNT ally Broad Front (Frente Amplio) party, which had lost the presidency and both legislative houses in November after 15 years in power, also spoke.

A list of 12 demands was presented at the protest, among them: basic rent for those thrust into unemployment by the pandemic; a minimum salary for all households; aid to small and medium-sized businesses; prohibition of unilateral measures by businesses, such as wage cuts, without negotiation; “flexibilize” the payment of fares and public services; price controls on anti-pandemic supplies, gas and food; control of speculation; provision of supplies for health workers; hygienic measures for schools and public transportation; access to health facilities for all people; apply measures to prevent femicide.

Strike at Oregon distillery enters second month

Workers at Hood River Distillers in Hood River, Oregon, are entering their second month on strike against unilateral cuts in health insurance and retirement compensation. The 25 members of Teamsters Local 670 first walked off the job on May 6.

The Teamsters union says they settled the wage portion of the contract, but after 13 months of negotiations they were deadlocked on medical and pension issues. The company has imposed a more inferior 401(k) plan on strikers that currently covers Hood River non-union workers.

Production at the facility is largely at a standstill despite the company’s threat to hire replacement workers. Railroad workers have refused to cross picket lines to deliver seven tanker cars containing bulk alcohol, and when the air conditioning unit in the plant broke down, HVAC repair crews also honored picket lines.

California blueberry farm workers strike against pay cut

Farm workers at Durango Farm Management in California walked off the job May 3 after management unilaterally cut their pay for picking blueberries. “When we got here this morning, they told us that if we want

to work today, the price would be \$6.50 per container,” said a striker.

“They are paying us too little,” said another worker. “In the store, these are really expensive.”

Normally, workers are paid \$7 per container, with each container of blueberries weighing about 12 pounds. That works out to a mere 54 cents per pound.

Considered “essential workers” in the current pandemic, these farm workers are required to buy their own equipment, which can cost \$45 to \$50.

Frontline workers fight for COVID-19 compensation

Despite the occasional fine words about heroic frontline workers spouted by government officials across Canada, essential workers in health care and retail sectors continue to fight for adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and compensation that has been promised but seldom delivered.

Hospital and long-term care employees in British Columbia, Quebec and Ontario report, five months since the global pandemic was declared, that they are still forced to re-use masks and other PPE when supplies run short.

In Manitoba, only about one-half of grocery store workers are eligible for the C\$1,000 bonuses promised for workers regularly attending their jobs and are demanding inclusion. In British Columbia, the New Democratic Party government has refused to include retail workers in a recently announced plan to compensate frontline workers.

In Saskatchewan, 12,000 health care workers in the Service Employees International Union have been without a new contract for three years and have been stonewalled by the right-wing Scott Moe government. The workers have now threatened job action.

Employees in the government workers’ union and CUPE have called for a wage top-up program in that province. In an insult to low-wage workers across Saskatchewan, the Moe government announced a 13-cent-per-hour October increase in the minimum wage, which already is the lowest in Canada.

In Quebec, the country’s pandemic epicenter, 1,300 Montreal-area government speech therapists, physiotherapists, social workers and psychologists have been involuntarily reassigned to work as aides to patient attendants in the drastically understaffed long-term care facilities. The workers, who have been scheduled into 2021 for the dangerous assignments, are demanding that the government fill the placements with attractive wages so they can return to their fields of expertise.



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