

California farm workers strike over COVID-19; port workers in Belize and Montreal stage protests

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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California farm workers strike over COVID-19 infections

Non-union pistachio workers began picketing June 25 in the town of Wasco, California, after discovering via a television report that their fellow workers tested positive for COVID-19. “They continue to hide everything from us,” Veronica Perez told the Associated Press. “All we are asking is that all our rights are fulfilled and they treat us as essential workers and give us a safe place to work.”

Perez says Primex Farms, which harvests pistachios from a 5,000-acre operation, held no meeting to alert workers of the infections and only began providing masks recently. Previously, they would only sell masks for \$8 each.

Primex has publicly admitted to 31 cases of COVID-19, but subsequent reports now place the number of infected workers at 76. Some 50 out of 400 workers launched their protest and have voted each day to continue picketing in Wasco. As a result, the company has finally shut down their operation for deep cleaning.

Unions file lawsuit against Las Vegas, Nevada casinos over major failure to protect workers from coronavirus

Two Las Vegas unions filed suit last week against three major casino companies in US District Court charging management failed to notify workers of COVID-19 infections and did not immediately shut down areas of infection or conduct contact tracing, and alleging cases where the casinos did not put up plexiglass safety barriers in specific areas. Local 226 of the Culinary Union and Bartenders Union Local 165 launched the suit under conditions where the coronavirus has caused the deaths of at least 19 union members and their dependents in the period since March 1.

The lawsuit describes the incredible incompetence of management in the case of Sixto Zermeno, a bellman at The Signature at the MGM Grand casino. Upon contracting COVID-19, Zermeno immediately called in succession the front-line manager, front-desk manager and general manager. From there he was passed off to the scheduling system which informed

him they were not responsible and he was told to call MGM Resort’s corporate office. The corporate office conducted no inquiry about possible contacts with coworkers and provided no guidance.

The lawsuit, which seeks injunctive relief, alleges that the Las Vegas Casinos reopened June 4 with lax rules and procedures and “provided workers with flatly false information about how COVID-19 spreads and what its symptoms are, in an effort to keep workers on the job and revenues flowing.”

Montreal dockworkers launch limited strike

Longshoremen, heavy equipment operators, mechanics and ship’s helpers at the Port of Montreal conducted a 40-hour strike last week to press their demands for a new contract that addresses the oppressive working conditions on the docks. There are 1,125 workers in the Canadian Union of Public Employees bargaining unit. The strike was the outcome of lengthy government-union negotiations aimed at ensuring that the action would have the minimum impact possible, with only a portion of the workforce allowed to participate due to “essential services” regulations.

Over the past 20 months the workers have three times voted overwhelmingly for strike action. Yet until last week no strike had taken place as the union bowed to employer interference and federal government foot-dragging in the strike authorization process.

In the current negotiations a number of grievances have been highlighted for remediation. Current scheduling practices force workers to labor 19 days out of every 21. Due to the expansion in the volume of imports and exports at the port, the Maritime Employers Association has insisted on a three-fold increase in the pace of work during weekend shifts. In addition, a vicious disciplinary regime has resulted since the last contract was signed in 2013. There have been more than 30 firings and over 1,000 suspension days levied against members who have resisted the brutal working conditions.

After the first strike vote in December 2018, the Canada Industrial Relations Board convened to decide which, if any, essential products would be declared for the various cargoes

regularly loaded and unloaded at the port. Federal regulations allow for any service necessary to “prevent imminent and serious danger to the health and safety of the public” to be designated as essential. Brazenly, the Maritime Employers Association had insisted that all tasks performed by the dockworkers fall under an “essential” designation.

Belizean port workers protest wage cut

Workers for the Port of Belize Limited (PBL) began daily one-hour protests in front of the port in Belize City July 1. The port workers, members of the Christian Workers Union (CWU), chanted and held picket signs denouncing a 10 percent wage cut announced by PBL management, who are using the loss of revenue from the COVID-19 pandemic to unload the brunt of the crisis on the workers.

The CWU has called on PBL to make its financial records available to determine if the wage cut is justified. The authorities refused to do so, drawing workers’ criticisms that the PBL is showing bad faith and disrespect for the workers. A CWU spokesman told reporters that the union wants a tripartite discussion, involving the PBL, CWU and the Labor Ministry, to “resolve this tension that we have here.”

Ecuadorian unions ratify national protest against anti-worker law

Members of the General Union of Workers of Ecuador (EGTE) voted in assembly July 2 to hold a nationwide protest against the recently passed Humanitarian Aid Law. Ecuador’s National Assembly approved the law, presented as an emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but numerous organizations oppose it as yet another neoliberal measure to attack labor rights and working class living standards.

A press release by the United Workers Front, to which the UGTE is affiliated, pointed out that “the struggle will be legal, juridical, but also in the streets, and therefore, we called it for July 16, in the entire country, against this perverse law and neoliberal policy.” Mobilizations, including strikes and marches, will take place in the capital Quito and other cities and will involve organizations of workers, peasants, housewives, teachers and indigenous people.

Other demands of the protests will be the jailing of corrupt officials and defense of retired workers in the Ecuadorian Social Security Institute system.

Teachers in Bolivia picket in defense of public education

Teachers in Cochabamba picketed and held a hunger strike July 1 in front of their union headquarters to demand respect for free education, promotions of categories, the annulment of virtual classes and the firing of Education Minister Victor Hugo Cárdenas.

Members of the Confederation of Urban Teachers of Bolivia had taken a similar action on June 29 at the Teachers Social House in La Paz. Both groups denounced Cárdenas as “incompetent” and “arrogant” in their call for his resignation.

Regarding the implementation of Supreme Decree 4260, which legalizes and regulates virtual education, a Confederation statement explained that it opposes the decree “because it is rather ambiguous and unconstitutional when it indicates that the state will not derogate an additional amount, being that education is the priority of the state.” The teachers fear that the decree will further open the door for the privatization of education.

Chilean supermarket workers strike over pay, pandemic response

Employees of the Unimarc supermarket chain in three Chilean communities—Arica, Parinacota and Tarapacá—went on strike July 3. About 760 members of the workers’ union voted in favor of the action due to the inadequacy of management’s offer. The walkout resulted in the closure of 10 Unimarc stores.

The offer would have raised monthly wages for part-timers by between 2,200 and 7,000 pesos (US\$2.74 and \$8.72), while the union was asking for between 30,000 and 35,000 (US\$37 and US\$44), “which is nothing considering that the supermarkets have gained a lot in the framework of the pandemic,” said union president Manuel Jeria.

According to Jeria, “almost 70 percent of the workers earn less than 350,000 pesos [US\$436]; we have a workforce that is 80 percent women, homeowners, the majority of supermarkets have older adults and we hope that the business puts its hand on its heart and invests in workers.”

Workers have also complained that Unimarc has not invested in adequate PPE or taken necessary measures in response to the pandemic, exposing workers to risk of infection.



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