

Disney workers in Florida locked out over lack of COVID testing;
Peru doctors strike over PPE and back pay

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Mexican auto parts workers strike over nonpayment of bonus, working conditions

Workers at the Nakamura Engineering Works México auto parts plant located in an industrial park north of the city of Zacatecas, Zacatecas walked off the job July 7. The workers, who number over 500, downed their tools to demand the payment of a profit-sharing bonus owed them from May.

Nakamura management has kept the factory running all through the COVID-19 pandemic, yet claims that, because of it, there were losses that made payment of the bonus impossible. Workers have demanded that Nakamura open the books; the company has refused to do so. In fact, for over five years Nakamura has had a system of a “conditional bonus,” by which workers are subject to fines as punishment for absences and “yellow reports” that deduct money from the promised 3,000-peso (US\$134) bonus, sometimes leaving the worker in debt to the company at the end of the year.

That is not the only complaint, however. Nakamura provides company buses to bring workers to the plant from surrounding communities at 7:00 AM, but does not provide the buses at the conclusion of the legally determined workday, 4:30 PM. Instead, workers either have to stay at the plant—usually under pressure to work a 12-hour day—until the company bus leaves at 7:00 PM, or he or she has to walk to a public bus stop and pay for public transport. Those who work the 12-hour days earn barely 1,500 pesos (US\$67) a week.

Lastly, the workers are demanding that they be provided with adequate personal protective equipment, especially masks—since not only is there the risk of COVID-19, but furnaces emit toxic fumes—a safe and hygienic workplace and equipment like back braces for carrying heavy loads.

When asked by a *La Jornada* reporter about what their union has done to help them, one worker replied, “We have a charro [company] union, the union is practically not with us; it’s with the company.”

Belizean port workers union announce strike over pay cut

Workers at the Port of Belize Limited (PBL) took part in a “go slow” on July 8 as part of protests against PBL management’s unilateral imposition of a 10 percent pay cut. PBL claimed that the cut was necessary because

of the COVID-19 pandemic’s effect on business. The port workers, members of the Christian Workers Union (CWU), began holding protest actions July 1 and demanded that PBL open its books for inspection. PBL refused.

On the same day as the go slow the CWU submitted a notice of strike action. However, as CWU president Evan Hyde, told reporters, “The staff are not essential service except for the security personnel, so we had to declare the twenty-one-day notice for the security personnel.” Hyde did not say when the non-security workers would be called out.

So far, PBL has not responded to the protests and threat of a strike. Neither has the National Trade Union Congress of Belize (NTUCB); Hyde admitted that the NTUCB has shown no interest in the CWU workers’ struggle.

Health care workers in El Salvador protest to demand emergency measures against pandemic

Workers belonging to several health care unions gathered outside El Salvador’s Legislative Assembly building in the capital San Salvador July 6 to demand that measures be taken in response to the coronavirus pandemic. The main demand was for a “state of exception” regimen to bring down the rapidly rising rate of infections.

Protests took place in other major cities as well, including San Miguel, Santa Ana, Ahuachapán and Sonsonate.

Union representatives appealed to the legislature to approve of such measures as a strict quarantine, a bonus already promised to health care workers by the government, and payments to families of medical workers who have perished from the virus.

The protesters voiced their intention to carry out a strike if the Assembly fails to pass the emergency measures.

Guyana: protests over lockdowns without provision of aid

One week after a complete lockdown of Guyana’s northern Moruca sub district, residents took to the streets to protest the government’s policies and demand aid.

Following a June 29 report that Moruca accounted for 58 percent of the nation’s cases of COVID-19, the government imposed a suspension of all activities and services. Despite promises to provide aid to local businesses and working-class households, delivery has been inadequate.

Protesters, observing social distancing and mask requirements, carried

signs saying, “No lockdown without relief” and “Moruca matters.” With farmers unable to work their fields, businesses on restricted hours and cargo boats denied entry, many residents are unable to obtain food and supplies. There have also been complaints of “improper protocols” for testing and limited access to hospitals.

The residents demand that either the government let them loosen some restrictions in order to get food and supplies or provide relief in a consistent and adequate manner, while hewing to protocols.

Peruvian doctors announce national 48-hour strike to demand back pay, testing supplies, PPE

Peru’s Medical Federation called for a two-day national strike on July 15 and 16 to press for months of back pay for some of its members, testing supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE). According to Federation president Godofredo Talavera, these provisions were signed in an agreement with government in 2017, including a raise that was never realized.

Testing has been sporadic and inconsistent, with some regions giving them every 15 days, others every month and still others “almost never,” according to Talavera. To make matters worse, some doctors have gone without pay for more than three months.

The doctors will be joined in the strike by other personnel in the health care sector, all of whom have been impacted by the pandemic.

Although Peru was one of the earliest South American nations to respond to the coronavirus outbreak with quarantine measures, due to the shabby state of the health care system and shortages of critical supplies and PPE, it was unable to halt its rapid spread. As of July 12, Peru had over 326,300 cases and was heading towards 12,000 deaths.

Chilean food processing workers strike over pay and benefits

Workers at the Unilever Chile mayonnaise, dressing and sauce processing plant in Santiago, Chile voted July 9 to go on strike. The vote, according to the workers’ Syndicate No. 2, was 99.32 percent in favor.

In a communiqué, the union noted that Unilever’s profits have continued to grow during the pandemic, but that instead of sharing them with those who do “la pega,” (the hit, or the job) Unilever’s refuses to negotiate in good faith. It claimed that the company “takes advantage of the world context as an argument to diminish our benefits and salaries,” and that “owing to the sanitary restrictions, the power to demonstrate freely to visualize our situation is unthinkable, which puts us at a disadvantage.”

Negotiations have dragged on for several weeks without an agreement. The union statement lamented that the walkout had to occur in the midst of current conditions but said that the walkout was necessary.

Chilean copper miners vote to strike as pandemic rages

Workers at the Zaldívar copper mine in Chile’s Antofagasta region voted overwhelmingly—99 percent, according to their union—on July 10 to strike after rejecting management’s final pay offer. The strike is set to begin July 15, but the company said that it would appeal for mediation by

the right-wing government’s labor ministry.

The union voiced “regret” for the need for a strike, but said it will comply with the mediation decree.

Demands also include safety and sanitation measures. Mineworkers have been hit disproportionately by COVID-19, with around 3,000 cases out of 300,000 nationwide reported. Mining companies have not been forthcoming with figures on mineworkers’ deaths, and despite some dips in output and measures to supposedly limit the virus’s spread, have maintained production throughout the crisis.

Oregon utility workers strike against substandard contract

Utility workers at National Pipeline Company in Medford, Oregon walked off the job July 6 after months of negotiations broke down without an agreement over wages, benefits and safety issues. The company offered workers a 6 percent wage increase in the first year and 2.5 percent increases in the following two years, but workers complain that National Pipeline’s starting wage of \$15 an hour is nearly half of what other companies pay. Besides wages, workers receive no vacation days, holidays or pension.

The Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA), Local 609, revealed that National Pipeline had more than 25 serious injuries in 2018. Robert Laidlaw, a striking pipe fuser told Jefferson Public Radio, “We have a high turnover rate here — sometimes 40 percent in a year, which could mean half of our employees have less than a year of experience. We need higher wages so people could afford to stay here and work.”

In a separate statement to the *Mail Tribune*, he explained that digging up pipeline to repair leaks can be dangerous work, and complained, “All your training to fit pipe is done in an afternoon,” involving a video, a limited amount of hands-on work and a computer test.

National Pipeline serves as a subcontractor for Avista in the region covered by UWUA Local 609 workers. The contract expired back on February 15. The company is currently advertising for replacement workers.

Lockout of performers at Walt Disney’s Florida theme park

The union representing some 750 park employees at Walt Disney World in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, charged the company with locking out members of Actors’ Equity for demanding testing for coronavirus. The union alleges Walt Disney backed out of a pledge to provide testing as a condition for returning to work ahead of the theme park’s July 11 reopening.

Disney justified its retaliation against Actors’ Equity workers by trumpeting the fact that seven other unions agreed to its safety protocols concerning the virus. The company stated, “We are exercising our right to open without Equity performers.”

Actors’ Equity cited recent data last week revealing that Florida had just registered more than 114,000 new COVID-19 cases. The union has insisted on testing given that social distancing for many of the workers who perform as actors is not practical.

Low wage Quebec caregivers strike

Five hundred caregivers in Quebec City and Saguenay have gone on strike at seven senior's residences. The residences are owned by the Chartwell Group, the largest private provider of retirement homes in Canada. The workers, affiliated to the Federation de Travailleurs du Quebec (FTQ) have been without a new contract for 18 months. Workers currently earn between \$13.50 and \$14 per hour. The provincial minimum wage is \$13.10. Workers are demanding an immediate wage increase to \$15 an hour with a further \$1 per hour raise in the second and third year of the contract.

The caregivers entered a legal strike position only after the provincial labour board designated a percentage of the workforce as essential. Presently, the Quebec City region has seen a significant decline in COVID-19 infections. The union has undertaken to suspend its strike should infections return to the picketed facilities.

Last March and April, particularly at the epicenter of the coronavirus crisis in Montreal, low wage caregivers at seniors' residences owned by several other privately owned companies began absenting themselves from their jobs due to a lack of personal protective equipment, safety protocols and lax infection rate reporting from the managements involved. Conditions inside the affected homes became untenable, forcing the provincial government to institute a temporary \$4 per hour wage increase.



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