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Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Several dozen workers who participated in a strike July 7 and 8 at the Nagakura Engineering Works auto parts plant in Zacatecas, Mexico, were fired in the early hours of July 17. The general administrator, César Ramos, accompanied by security guards, told the workers that they were dismissed and tried to pressure them to sign their settlement checks (*cheques de liquidación*). When they refused, they were “tied up like pigs,” in the words of the workers, and taken out of the building.

More than 500 workers had struck to protest the company’s failure to pay a promised profit-sharing bonus under the pretext of losses due to the coronavirus pandemic. When workers asked to see the books, management refused. Following the strike, the company signed an agreement that they would not retaliate against the workers. Nagakura submitted a document to the Taxation Administration Service that purported to show its profits and losses, but workers believe that its figures are falsified.

Upon hearing about the firings, about 50 workers blocked the entrance to the plant, and then the company closed the doors. Security personnel prevented 300 workers inside from leaving to join the blockading co-workers. In response, the workers inside stopped working.

Apart from the falsification of data, a federal crime, the workers also claim that Nagakura has not carried out necessary measures to sanitize the plant and provide a safe work environment. Pleas to government bodies to investigate and intervene have gone unanswered.

Dockworkers in Belize face firings amid protests over wage cut

As workers for the Port of Belize Limited (PBL) continued their go-slow and lunchtime protest actions against a unilaterally imposed 10 percent pay cut, 36 of them were notified last week that they are being made redundant. Of those, 29 are members of the Christian Workers Union (CWU), which called the protests.

CWU President Evan Hyde called the sackings a “full frontal

assault” against the union and declared the pay cut that brought on the protests illegal. As for the claim that the PBL’s revenue has been halved because of the pandemic, he said, “We have not seen any documents to back that up.” For the time being, the CWU is in consultation with its attorneys.

Hyde had previously criticized the National Trade Union Congress of Belize (NTUCB) for its apparent lack of support for the CWU. NTUCB head Marvin Mora said that the NTUCB executive had met to review the documents and was scheduled to have another meeting Saturday to finalize a position.

“Mora says that while the NTUCB has always been in moral support of the CWU, a show of physical support would be a decision made by the union collectively,” reported amandala.com.bz.

Furniture factory workers in Barbados protest unsafe and unsanitary workplace

About 50 workers at the Oran Limited aluminum furniture factory in Bridgetown, Barbados, walked out on July 14 to protest rodent infestation and unsanitary conditions. When Oran had bait laid out, so many of the vermin came out that the workers felt unsafe and left. They then held a protest with hand-lettered placards in front of the plant.

The Barbados Workers Union was quick to deny that the workers were striking but were “in alignment with the Safety and Health at Work legislation” that allows them to leave an area that they deem unsafe until the problem is fixed. After some discussions, management brought in exterminators “to assess the rodent-infested area and initiate another round of baiting,” according to a *Barbados Today* report.

The workers have other complaints around sanitation. Mold and dust have built up and have not been removed. In addition, the workers do not believe that Oran has adequately provided them with the conditions and equipment needed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Panamanian doctors continue protests for more supplies and personnel to combat COVID-19

With over 50,000 people in Panama infected with COVID-19, and more than 1,000 dead, doctors in Panama have held protests to demand more equipment and personnel. On July 17, 50 doctors gathered in front of the Arnulfo Arias Madrid hospital in Panama City with signs demanding, among other slogans, “Take care of us to take care of them.”

By now, there are 60 to 70 patients for each doctor at the hospital, health care personnel are exhausted, and many staff have gotten infected. Since the recent reopening of economic activity, the number of daily infections has jumped from 200 to 1,000. As one doctor told *ticotimes.net*, “We do not see the decrease in cases, and we do not see personal protective equipment flow in the correct way.”

Conditions at Arnulfo Arias, and protests against them, are replicated throughout the nation of 4 million. After a week of record statistics—with 1,540 infections on July 13 alone—the government was compelled to impose a quarantine in the capital and its neighboring Panama Oeste province on July, covering half the population.

Chilean slaughterhouse workers’ strike continues over productivity bonus

A strike begun July 8 by slaughterhouse workers at Mafrisur, a meat processing and refrigeration plant in Osorno, Chile, has continued as negotiations between management and union reps remain at a standstill. About 340 workers are employed at Mafrisur, and nearly 300 are unionized.

The main point of contention in bargaining is the productivity bonus, which has not increased in seven years. A labor inspector intervened in the talks but was unable to bring about an accord. Workers remain far from satisfied with management’s latest offer. The union has pointed out that the company has experienced growth in this period and also has noted that the COVID-19 crisis has not impacted production this year.

Boston paratransit workers strike over demands for health care concessions

About 350 paratransit drivers for the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) went on strike July 12 to protest management demands for deep cuts in their health care benefits. Members of Teamsters Local 25 who provide transportation for disabled people in 58 communities across the greater Boston area are opposing increased health insurance costs while the new plan offers fewer options.

Veterans Transportation Services, which subcontracts the paratransit service for the MBTA, is a profitable company according to the Teamsters. However, since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the ridership has plummeted from the normal 6,500 riders per day to about 1,000 riders and has only recovered to some 2,500 daily riders, as many disabled people have underlying conditions that make them highly susceptible to COVID-19.

Consequently, management is seeking to put the decline in revenues on the backs of workers. At the same time, paratransit drivers are classified as essential workers and have been delivering groceries and other items during the pandemic.

Ontario hospital workers rally for workplace rights

Provincial hospital workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), rallied last week to restore rights that have been suspended by the Conservative government of Premier Doug Ford as part of an emergency pandemic bill. Bill 195, which is in effect for up to three years, forces workers to change shifts with no notice and enforces draconian layoff provisions. The shift change regulation, which does not take into account the impossibility of many workers with childcare responsibilities to change schedules without notice, and the layoff threats, flies in the face of the government’s hypocritical praise of the sacrifices of health care workers during the pandemic.

Ontario, one of the hardest-hit provinces, is still reporting more than 100 new cases per day. Health care workers in the province have one of the highest rates in the world for contracting the virus. Fourteen workers have died thus far with 6,200 contracting the virus. Workers for months confronted a criminal shortage of personal protective equipment that endangered their safety. In many locations, rationing of this equipment still occurs. Workers are calling for escalating action against Bill 195.



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