

## Belize stevedores face police repression, Montreal dockworkers launch four-day strike

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

### Belizean police fire rubber bullets and tear gas at port workers protesting pay cuts and firings

Workers at the Port of Belize Limited (PBL) began holding daily lunchtime protests July 1 against management's unilateral imposition of a 10 percent wage cut. PBL cited losses due to slowed traffic caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The Christian Workers Union (CWU), which represents the stevedores, requested that PBL make public its financial records, but the firm refused.

The CWU announced its intention to call a strike, but in accordance with Belizean labor laws, that action was not to take place for 21 days. Tensions increased when PBL announced that 36 workers, 29 of them CWU members, would be made redundant, supposedly due to the slowdown. When they were notified by text last week that their dismissals were in effect, workers escalated their protests, blocking the entrance to the port.

On July 22, PBL called the Police Department, which sent its Gang Suppression Unit (GSU) to squelch the protests. GSU officers fired rubber bullets and tear gas at the protesters, seriously injuring at least one. Although the attorney general and minister of security called the GSU violence "unwarranted" and promised an investigation, PBL released a statement accusing the "unlawful" and "violent" CWU protesters of allegedly setting fires, vandalizing property and tampering with the electrical supply.

The statement added, "PBL thanks the authorities for their efforts to regain control after bearing witness to these acts and for their decisive action this morning to raise the security level at the Port." At the same time, PBL continues to refuse to open its books.

### Costa Rican municipal workers protest government austerity measures

Several hundred members of municipal unions marched July 23 down Costa Rica's main street to the Presidential House in San José to protest government austerity policies. At the same time, a number of workers joined 30 mayors at the Legislative Assembly to ask them to reject deep cuts advocated by President Carlos Alvarado.

Alvarado has submitted a proposal to the legislature that would cut the

national budget by one percent of GDP, a move that would fall most heavily on the working class. As it has throughout Latin America, the coronavirus pandemic has brought many Costa Rican cities to the verge of bankruptcy, placing additional demands on budgets, increasing poverty and raising official unemployment to over 20 percent.

### Strike in Panama over port firm bargaining dispute

Panama's SITRAVAAP port workers union called a strike July 17 to demand a resolution to a conflict with Panama Ports that has festered for a year. The union is demanding that the firm, a subsidiary of Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison Holdings, the world's largest seaport company, recognize it as the workers' bargaining agent, which it was previously. Panama Ports had been seeking to undermine the union with firings, changes in wage scales and attempts to create a company union in 2019.

On July 17 SITRAVAAP called a strike that went on for 12 days, at which point the union and management signed an agreement following a court order in favor of the union. Panama Ports, however, filed a motion to the Supreme Court for clarification and claimed that it could not negotiate while the appeal awaits a decision. Petitions and protests by the workers were to no avail, so they walked out again last week; as of July 24, the strike was still ongoing.

### Protests in Panama over government response to pandemic crisis

Workers and residents of Panama City marched and blocked streets in Panama City July 21 to again voice their denunciations of the government's inadequate response to the crisis brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. The protesters, wearing masks, marched to the National Assembly to urge lawmakers to reject a bill that would enact "reforms" to the Labor Code detrimental to workers.

The changes would threaten the *aguinaldo*, also known as the "13th month" bonus, which is equivalent to a month's pay and is given at the end of the year. They would loosen regulations regarding wages, conditions and workers' rights as well.

Not only has Panama been the Latin American nation hardest-hit by COVID-19, but also the government's inability or unwillingness to alleviate the situation for the Panamanian working class has made a dire situation worse. PPE, medicine and supplies for doctors and other health workers have been woefully inadequate, and many residents have yet to receive promised "solidarity aid" as their meager resources were depleted

in the face of quarantine and unemployment.

### **Brazilian delivery workers hold one-day strike again to demand better pay and conditions**

As they did on July 1 and 18, app-based delivery workers in Brazil held a one-day strike July 25 for better pay and conditions, as well as protective equipment to ward off COVID-19. Other demands include security from robberies and assaults, mileage and overtime pay, and an end of punctuality penalties. Harassment by police is a constant complaint as well.

The largest mobilizations took place in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia.

### **Snack food plant workers in Argentina defy union, go on indefinite strike against “super-exploitation”**

Workers at the giant Pepsico plant in Mar del Plata, which produces savory and sweet snack foods, walked out on July 21 in rejection of an agreement signed between the firm and the Food Industry Workers Federation (FTIA). The workers claimed that the deal was agreed behind their backs and they accused Pepsico of “super-exploitation.”

Workers accuse Pepsico of promising a weekly bonus of 3,500 pesos (US\$48.72) to continue working and then not paying it. They also say that since 2018 parity talks have produced raises much lower than the inflation rate and that the wage that the FTIA signed falls below the “family basket” (*canasta familiar*) or basic cost of living.

One worker told *El Mar Platense* that the FTIA “gave away our parity using the excuse that we live in an exceptional situation. They didn’t even negotiate, and they went on to accept what the company proposed.” She added, “We don’t accept the deal agreed to by the union. We want to sit down to negotiate our salary because Pepsico is a multinational that easily can pay us what is appropriate for us.”

Pepsico has demanded that in order to reach an agreement, the workers first have to lift the strike. One worker told quedigital.com.ar, “No way are we going to do that. The only viable thing for the workers together, to lift the measure, is that they [Pepsico] put forward a formal offer.”

FTIA had agreed to a raise of 6 percent to be given in August and a 0.5 percent raise in September. The striking workers are calling for a 40 percent raise, keeping in mind purchasing power lost in 2019 and 2020. They also want an 11 percent adjustment plus a productivity bonus, and a bonus for doing essential work during the pandemic. In addition, they are calling for attendance and punctuality bonuses.

### **Argentina: Daycare center workers, proprietors hold protest to demand aid**

A group of teachers, support staff and proprietors of daycare centers in the city of Roca, Argentina marched to the city center and held a lively protest July 23 to demand aid in the midst of the acute crisis brought on by the municipal government’s insufficient response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Marchers gathered in front of the municipal government offices

downtown and held a press conference. They noted that the municipal government had promised to deliver a subsidy of 150,000 pesos (US\$2,088) in addition to a 100,000-peso (US\$1,400) contribution, promises that it had not made concrete.

Leaders of the protest noted that there are 13 daycare centers in Roca employing at least 150 workers who had to stay at home following the imposition of a quarantine March 20. They also emphasized that their colleagues nationwide shared their predicament.

### **Workers at Argentine airport stage protest for job security**

Several dozen employees of LATAM, Latin America’s largest airline, picketed in front of Buenos Aires’s Jorge Newbery Airport to protest job insecurity. The workers had requested that the government hold crisis prevention proceedings concerning over 1,700 jobs threatened by restructuring in the industry, but the Fernández administration refused.

Protesters accused LATAM of using the COVID-19 crisis to extort workers to take “voluntary” redundancies. Several workers said that they had been shorted on their paychecks or not paid altogether since the pandemic hit. A group of about 20 protesting workers at Jorge Newbery have occupied LATAM’s hangar in an attempt to keep the carrier from taking the planes out.

LATAM, which is based in Chile, had announced on June 17 that it was going to close down its Argentina branch. Since then, LATAM workers have been in a state of limbo, unsure of the status of their jobs. Already, some 400,000 airline workers worldwide have been fired, furloughed or told that they may face dismissal.

### **Warehouse and maintenance workers strike Fort Wayne, Indiana food distribution center over firings**

About 160 drivers, warehouse and maintenance workers struck the United Natural Foods (UNFI) distribution center July 23 in Fort Wayne, Indiana over unfair labor practices. Teamsters Local 414 has bargained “fruitlessly” for nearly a year and workers have been months without a contract.

The union has cited issues such as wages, benefits, use of contract labor and production standards as stumbling blocks in negotiations. But it pointed to “a major issue of contention” involving a work rule concerning how workers must respond to a direct order by the company management. According to the Teamsters, it has led to the “arbitrary” firing of two workers without the presence of a union steward, something that has been a long-time practice.

UNFI responded by saying the Teamsters strike was illegal and while not mentioning the firings, said the union rejected the offer “over a single provision that is completely out of line with our other contracts or common market practice.” The company press release went on, “The reality is that in order for UNFI to meet the needs of its various stakeholders ... it is important to have labor agreements that allow us to be flexible and nimble in today’s changing food distribution environment.”

Back in December 2019 the Teamsters called another unfair labor practices strike at the Fort Wayne facility, charging the company with “abusive behavior.” UNFI had been the largest wholesale distributor to natural and organic retailers in the United States and Canada and highly anti-union. A merger with SuperValue has now made it the largest publicly traded grocery distributor in America.

## **Coronavirus hits Alaska seafood processing plants**

Fifty-six fish processing workers at the Copper River Seafoods plant in Anchorage, Alaska tested positive for COVID-19 last week. The Anchorage Health Department reported that most of the 134 workers employed at the plant are residents of the city. The department is still awaiting test results from another 30 workers.

Copper River Seafoods represents the third largest outbreak of coronavirus cases in the state. At the OBI Seafoods facility in Seward, Alaska some 98 cases were recorded as of the end of the week. The factory trawler American Triumph docked at Dutch Harbor, Alaska with 85 cases on board. None of the crewmembers of the factory trawler were residents of Alaska.

The fourth-highest case count totaled 40 at the Alaska Glacier Seafoods plant in Juneau. Only eight of those infected are local residents.

Dr. Bruce Chandler with the city health department told the *Anchorage Daily News*, “With so many workers now testing positive, it is likely that this outbreak has been in progress for some time and that transmission has already occurred among family, friends and others in the community.”

## **Montreal dockworkers launch second round of strike action**

Hundreds of dockworkers at the Port of Montreal began a four-day strike Monday. The action will affect work at all Montreal terminals excepting shipments of grain as well as cargo destined for Newfoundland marshalled from the Empire terminal. The federal government had earlier designated a portion of the jobs on the docks as essential, thereby requiring a section of the 1,125 workers to continue to provide their services.

The action is the second work stoppage this month. The longshoremen, heavy equipment operators, mechanics and ships' helpers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, conducted a 40-hour strike at the beginning of July to press their demands for a new contract that addresses the oppressive working conditions on the docks.

Over the past 20 months the workers have voted three times overwhelmingly for strike action. Yet until this month 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. The Maritime Employers Association has insisted on a threefold increase in the pace of work during weekend shifts. In addition, a vicious disciplinary regime has resulted since the last contract was signed seven years ago. There have been at least 30 firings and over 1,000 suspension days levied against members who have resisted the brutal working conditions.

Shipments at the Port of Montreal have been significantly reduced as a result of the coronavirus crisis. So far in 2020 total cargo volumes have fallen by 9 percent, a reduction that has been echoed in port facilities across the globe.

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