

Bermuda dockworkers stage protest; Colombia mineworkers take strike vote

## Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

### Bermudian dockworkers protest cost-cutting plans

Dockworkers for Stevedoring Services Limited (SSL) at Bermuda's capital and major port city Hamilton adopted a "suspended overtime" policy last week in response to the company's cost-cutting plans. SSL claims that the economic hit that the harbor has taken due to the COVID-19 pandemic makes their plans necessary.

Among the measures that SSL has proposed is the outsourcing of garage service workers, and it is already negotiating with another firm. While the garage workers were at first assured that there would be no change in their status, a Bermuda Industrial Union (BIU) official pointed out to the *Royal Gazette* that they were actually only "entitled to an interview with no guarantee of a new career."

Another tactic in the cost-cutting plan would be to leave positions vacant as workers retire, increasing the workload on remaining staff. Already, three of eight vacated positions remain unfilled. The BIU has withdrawn its support for SSL's license to operate the port, owned by the Corporation of Hamilton.

Chris Furbert, president of the BIU, told reporters that the port workers' relationship with management had deteriorated over the years and that there were "serious issues" with morale. However, he also affirmed that the workers' action "would not have a harmful impact on the regular flow of supplies into the island," reported the *Gazette*.

### Colombian mineworkers vote overwhelmingly for strike

### over pay and working conditions

Voting on the response to contract negotiations at the Cerrejón mining complex in the Colombian department of La Guajira ended on August 20. The mineworkers' union, Sintracarbón, called the vote, which began on August 8, as negotiations with the company stalled over pay, benefits and working conditions. The vote in favor of strike action, as opposed to submitting to arbitration, was over 99 percent.

Contract talks have dragged on since December, and in March, workers voted 98.8 percent in favor of strike action. When the pandemic struck, the union backed off from a walkout, although management kept production going.

In restarted virtual negotiations, in which Labor Ministry officials participated, the company has refused to back down from its proposals to change to a more grueling shift structure—which workers have dubbed the "schedule of death"—cut health coverage and other benefits, promote "voluntary" retirement, attack job stability and give a small wage increase that would be frozen for three years.

The strike, barring intervention by the government or another delay by the union, which continues to express its desire for "dialogue," was scheduled to begin September 1.

### Uruguayan state workers strike for 24 hours over salary cut proposal

Uruguay's Confederation of State Functionaries Organizations (COFE) called a one-day national strike for August 27 to protest a proposal by the government of President Luis Lacalle Pou to cut public sector wages using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext. In an assembly of delegates, where the vote was passed, COFE Secretary General Joselo López denounced Lacalle Pou, who "did not

fulfill the commitment assumed in the electoral campaign and in the transition period that there would be no lowering of salary.”

López asserted that the salary guidelines recently presented by Lacalle Pou “effectively enshrines a reduction of approximately five points of the salary” and accused him of “only think[ing] of fiscal equilibrium adjusted on the side of work and the workers.” Since Lacalle Pou took office on March 1, 2020, state workers fear that the plan would generate continuing wage declines for five years, the length of his term.

The one-day mobilization was also called to demand “a budget that contemplates more resources for public health and education for the great majority” and for an end to privatizations, attrition, and attacks on labor rights.

### **Argentina: Municipal workers strike for 48 hours over wage demands**

Municipal workers in Rosario, the largest city in Argentina’s Santa Fe province, held a two-day strike August 26 and 27 to demand the resumption of parity talks and a wage raise to counteract inflation. Holding signs saying, “Applause does not pay the bills” and “Parity talks now,” workers held demonstrations in front of a local hospital to press their demands.

According to the Municipal Workers Syndicate, workers face a fall in real wages of up to 30 percent due to Argentina’s rampant inflation rate, which is widely seen as undercalculated in official statistics. In addition to parity talks and a wage raise, the union is calling for adequate staffing at hospitals and clinics to deal with the pandemic. In some cases, hospital workers are putting in workdays of 12 to 16 hours.

### **California farm workers suffer from exposure to toxic smoke from wildfires**

According to reports, 84 percent of California farm workers have not been supplied with N95 masks as are required under state law if the Air Quality Index is over 150. Clouds of toxic smoke have covered the state due to wildfires that have ravaged more than 1 million acres.

The majority of California farm workers are from Mexico and earn minimum wage. With summer temperature often

over 100 degrees Fahrenheit and poor air quality, they are subject to heat and respiratory illness.

Farm workers, though low paid and living in often crowded conditions, are deemed “essential workers” and must continue to labor in order to survive. The vast majority of farm workers have no health insurance and live in constant fear of being sick and unable to support themselves.

### **Newfoundland court issues injunction against Dominion grocery strikers**

The Newfoundland Supreme Court has handed down an injunction to significantly limit picketing at 11 strike-bound grocery stores across the province. Over the course of the past week, strikers had successfully prevented Dominion contract maintenance staff and food trucks from crossing picket lines to remove perishable foodstuffs from the stores. Picketers had notified the company that they were only prepared to allow trucks operated by public food banks and soup kitchens to remove inventory.

Fourteen-hundred low-wage workers at 11 Dominion food retail stores across Newfoundland and Labrador are in the second week of their strike after overwhelmingly rejecting a tentative agreement recommended by their union, Unifor. Workers have been without a contract for the past 11 months. Designated as “essential” workers, they have labored through the entirety of the pandemic that began in March.

In June, Loblaw Companies Limited, the parent group of the Dominion chain, ended their short-lived C\$2 per hour pandemic pay increase for the portion of front-line staff eligible for the payment. The rejected contract offer only provided for a miserable C\$1 per hour raise spread over the next three years.

Workers have not received a contractual pay increase since early 2018. In 2019, management cut more than 60 full-time positions. Today, over 80 percent of the Dominion workforce are low-wage part-time employees with almost no benefits. The Loblaw conglomerate is the largest retail food distributor in Canada, employing 200,000 workers. It is owned by the Weston family, the third wealthiest family in the country with an estimated net worth of C\$7 billion.



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