

Costa Rican workers protest IMF austerity talks; Two Haitian students die in jobs protests

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 October 2020

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

Protests by Costa Rican workers against proposed IMF agreement continue

Since September 30, workers in Costa Rica have set up roadblocks at major border crossings to protest negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Workers fear that the proposed agreement, ostensibly to straighten out public finances, would impose austerity measures and tax increases impacting the working class the hardest.

In a mobilization called by the National Association of Public Employees (ANEP), workers in the public sector marched through San José, Costa Rica on October 6 in support of the blockades. Members of unions in education joined the protest.

Some clashes between protesters and police were reported on October 8, when police tried to break up the blockades. The Public Security Ministry has claimed that criminal organizations were joining the protests and fomenting violence.

The government for now has discontinued the IMF talks, though widespread skepticism remains among workers.

Salvadoran municipal workers block roads to demand funding, back pay

Municipal workers across El Salvador held protest actions on October 7 to demand the delivery of overdue funds for municipal projects and wages. There were at least 11 separate blockades of major highways. Some of the blockades lasted no more than two hours, while others continued through most of the day.

The impetus for the protests was the lack of payments from the Economic and Social Development Fund (FODES) for the last four months, as well as monies from an emergency fund approved in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, the amount owed has been calculated at US\$200 million.

About 260 municipalities throughout El Salvador are supposed to receive the payments, which represent about 10 percent of state revenues. In response to the protests the Treasury minister claimed that the Assembly has not approved the credits for FODES and that hospitals are the top priority for any funding.

Two university students in Haiti killed in protests demanding work, end to police violence

Some 200 university students held a protest and blocked streets in Port-au-Prince on October 5 to denounce the deaths of two of their peers in previous actions. The earlier protests were called to demand opportunities to work in their professions. Two students have died since the protests began.

One of them, Gregory Saint-Hilaire, 29, who had studied social science and law, was seeking a teaching position in accordance with an agreement by the Superior Normal School to provide internships and teaching jobs. On October 2, during an attempt by a group of students to get information about the promised jobs, police arrived and fired tear gas, and at one point, Saint-Hilaire was shot in the back. The police continued to attack the students, preventing them from getting him to the hospital for almost three hours. He died there shortly after arrival.

The protests and blockades have continued. At an October 9 protest, police arrived and fired tear gas, sending the students running for cover. One student who was not involved in the protest was shot in the elbow while leaving the campus. Some protesters, enraged by the attack, threw rocks and set fire to a courthouse.

Laid-off Bahamian resort workers stage protest to demand full severance pay

An organization called Operation Sovereign Bahamas organized a protest march for October 7, in Nassau, joined by scores of laid-off resort workers chanting and carrying picket signs. Among the protesters were workers from the Atlantis Casino resort. The original plan was to march over the Sidney Poitier Bridge to Atlantis, but they were blocked by police, who directed them to a nearby park and kept a watchful eye on them, with two police buses parked at the scene as well.

When the protesters decided to walk to the Parliament Building to make their case to the legislators, they were told that they needed to get permission from the Speaker of the House of Assembly beforehand. Some of them drove to the Parliament hoping to appeal to Prime Minister Dr. Hubert Minnis. According to protest organizer Adrian Francis, “they rushed Dr. Minnis out of Parliament and they rushed him in his car.”

The Atlantis Casino resort on Paradise Island, Bahamas laid off hundreds of employees during the spring as COVID-19 swept over the island and tourism collapsed. According to the island’s Employment Act, employers are required to pay laid-off workers full redundancy payments or recall them to their jobs after 90 days. However, the government

decreed an exception to the law in the context of the pandemic and put the payments on hold until the end of November.

Workers have struggled to get by on the weekly government unemployment benefit of B\$150 (the Bahamian dollar, or B\$, is equivalent to the US dollar). They have been calling for full severance pay, especially since they see no end to the pandemic in sight.

Colombian hospital workers resume strike to demand overdue wages

Personnel of the Rosario Pumarejo de López Hospital in Valledupar, César province, Colombia marched to the Government Plaza October 7 to press their demand for up to 11 months in unpaid wages. They declared that they would strike if they did not receive their pay. Emergency services would remain in effect.

The medical and health care workers have already struck twice, once in July and August and again in September. Each time, they have been persuaded to return based on promises from government officials, promises that were ignored once they were back on the job.

On September 3, Health Minister Fernando Ruíz promised the delivery of 15 million pesos (US\$3.9 million), “an amount that would arrive after approximately three weeks; nonetheless, the remittance has not arrived,” according to an *El Heraldo* report.

Argentine bus drivers strike for unpaid wages

Bus drivers in Argentina’s Tucumán province began an indefinite strike at 7 p.m. October 6. In San Miguel de Tucumán, the provincial capital, about 100 buses blocked the streets. The UTA transportation workers union called the walkout to demand the payment of wages from August and September.

The companies that employ the transportation workers claim that they cannot deliver the wages because they have not received subsidies from the provincial government, while the Treasurer claims that the delays are caused by cases of COVID-19 among Treasury employees. UTA said that service will not resume until the wages are paid in full.

Meanwhile, bus service between the city of Neuquén, capital of the province of the same name, and the municipality of Centenario, about 15 km (9 mi.) to the north, was suspended due to the nonpayment of September’s wages. Owners of the buses made the same claim as did those of Tucumán.

Company spokespeople have alleged that UTA pressured drivers not to work, a charge denied by local UTA secretary Claudio Coronel. “We told them that he who wants to work, do it,” Coronel told *rionegro.com*. He also accused the empresarios of not paying a parity adjustment agreed upon five months ago.

Argentina: municipal workers strike for raises

Municipal workers in San Martín de los Andes, a city in Neuquén province, went on strike October 8. Their list of demands includes a wage increase according to the Consumer Price Index, payment for work clothes and payment of wages on time.

The last demand no doubt was made with the current bus drivers strikes

in mind. In fact, bus drivers in San Martín de los Andes struck for five days last month over unpaid wages.

The striking city workers, members of the ATE state workers union, blocked traffic in front of the city hall. An ATE official said that “from the executive there is no response.” ATE will hold an assembly to decide on what steps to take next.

Chilean mineworkers strike over pay, benefits, conditions

After weeks of government-mandated mediation talks, 350 unionized mineworkers at the Minera Candelaria copper mining complex in Chile’s Atacama region began a strike October 8. Management at the mine, owned primarily by Canadian Lundin Mining, refused to budge from its September 28 final offer.

Among the main bones of contention are wages, changes to benefits and management’s push for “polyfunctionality” or flexibility of job classification.

The union claimed high adherence to the walkout, but management stated that the unionized workers only accounted for a third of operators and that “the other workers and contractors presented themselves to their shift in a normal manner.”

The disunited state of the Candelaria workers is shown by the negotiation cycle. The firm reached an agreement with the LMC AOS union in May and is currently in negotiations with the 550-member Candelaria Operators Syndicate. It will also enter into talks with two unions representing 230 supervisors at the end of October.

West Virginia grocery workers hold car caravan to call attention to stalled contract talks

Kroger grocery workers in West Virginia, members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 400, held car caravans October 1 to protest the failure of lack of a contract settlement. Negotiations began in August. The old contract expired August 29 with a contract extension until October 17.

Besides wages and health care issues, the contracts also deal with safe work practices conditions under the pandemic. The UFCW issued a statement, declaring, “[T]here have been at least 103 grocery worker deaths and over 14,300 grocery workers infected or exposed to COVID-19. As a new investigation by Bloomberg recently reported, the actual national number of workers who have died, become sick, or been exposed, is likely much higher given that America’s largest food companies have launched an effort to hide the true human cost.”

Ohio school district to go to court to block teachers strike

The superintendent of Gahanna-Jefferson school district in Gahanna, Ohio said October 9 that he is preparing to file an appeal for a temporary restraining order to block a strike by 570 of the district’s teachers. Mediated contract negotiations are grinding down as they head toward an October 13 strike deadline that coincides with a return to in-person instruction for some of the district’s schools. Prior to this, classes have been held using distance learning since the start of school August 24.

Neither the district nor the Gahanna-Jefferson Education Association have revealed details of negotiations. Betsy Baker, speaking on behalf of the teachers union, seemed to indicate that the stalemate involved the dangers surrounding the pandemic when she said, “We’re still open to any plan that’s presented to us that provides that safe and equitable environment...”

In a public statement Superintendent Steve Barrett said that in addition to barring a strike, the district “also voted to authorize district leaders to do what is necessary to prepare for a potential strike, including securing teachers and educational resources outside the district to assure equity and access to learning for all GJPS students.”

Massachusetts paratransit workers strike over health care costs

Drivers and mechanics for the Lowell Regional Transit Authority’s Road Runner paratransit service in Lowell, Massachusetts went on strike October 5 to protest their low wages and excessive health care costs. Teamsters Local 170 says workers are demanding the contractor, MV Transportation, increase its portion of health care coverage from 70 percent to 80 percent.

The 10 striking drivers make \$16 an hour for full-time work and \$14 an hour for part-time. They say they simply cannot afford the health care plan, which, for a family, consumes 29 percent of their annual before tax earnings.

MV Transportation has threatened to hire permanent replacements. MV Transportation, Inc., based in Dallas, Texas, is the largest private provider of paratransit services and the largest privately owned transportation contracting firm in the United States.

Newfoundland Dominion grocery workers continue strike

Over 1,400 low-wage workers at 11 Dominion grocery stores across Newfoundland and Labrador are now in the eighth week of a strike after overwhelmingly rejecting a tentative agreement recommended by their union, Unifor, last August. With management refusing to negotiate further and insisting that the rejected offer will be the only one available, strikers expanded their actions last week with a secondary picket at a St. John’s No Frills grocery store which is a franchise operation of Dominion’s parent company, Loblaw.

The workers, members of Unifor Local 597, have not received a contractual pay increase since early 2018. In 2019, management cut more than 60 full-time positions. Today, 83 percent of Dominion’s workforce is comprised of low-wage, part-time employees with no, or at best minimal, benefits.

Fully three-quarters of the striking workers make less than C\$15 per hour, with a majority of the part-timers laboring at or just above the current provincial minimum wage of C\$12.15, which is among the lowest provincial minimum wage rates in all Canada.

The Loblaw conglomerate is the largest retail food distributor in Canada, employing 200,000 workers. It is owned by the Westons, the country’s third-wealthiest family.





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