

Strike by Nicaraguan apparel workers over sackings

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Workers in Nicaraguan free trade zone factory strike over firings, company/union severance agreement

Over 1,200 workers at the New Holland Apparel textile plant in Nicaragua struck May 7 following a meeting between union and company representatives in which the firm refused a proposal to pay three months of wages when the plant closes on May 28. Instead, management offered, and the union accepted, a one-time payment of 700 Córdobas, equal to a little less than US\$20, an amount called a “joke” by workers. Some 800 workers have signed a petition opposing the agreement “because our rights are violated, and an agreement was made with which we are not in accord.”

In mid-April, the company, claiming that there were problems with production caused by the pandemic, announced plans to shutter the plant and move operations to El Salvador. The company had already fired over 1,300 workers last July, claiming “lack of raw materials” and problems related to COVID-19. Many of the fired workers were suffering from work-related health problems.

The New Holland plant is located in a free trade zone in Managua. Free trade zones are promoted throughout Latin America and elsewhere as a way to attract foreign investment and provide jobs by lowering or eliminating taxes and duties while relaxing wage, labor rights, environmental and other regulations. Pay is low, hours are long, the work is hard and work-related illnesses and injuries—carpal tunnel syndrome, headaches, fractures, muscle pain and cancer among them—are common.

The government of Daniel Ortega uses populist rhetoric to posture as a defender of the Nicaraguan working class, but its pro-investor policies belie that talk. The Sandinista-aligned unions are seen by workers more as enforcers of corporate dictates than pro-worker organizations.

Protests in Haiti against kidnappings continue

Haitians have continued their protests against the kidnappings and other violence that have plagued the country. In the capital Port-au-Prince, protesters erected barricades May 7 on major streets in various neighborhoods. Other actions in recent weeks include blocking access points to the National Palace and the University of Haiti and the closing of notary offices in 18 jurisdictions following the kidnapping of a colleague.

The government has done nothing to stem the tide of rampant violence, though it has denounced the protesters. Opposition organizations accuse the government of Jovenel Moïse of financing and equipping gangs to feed the climate of fear and retaliate against critics and rivals.

Bolivian health professionals hold one-day strike over delayed salaries, firings, emergency law

Medical sector workers in Bolivia struck for 24 hours May 7 over a number of grievances against the government. Among their major demands is the repeal of the Emergency Sanitary Law enacted earlier this year. The strikers call the law unconstitutional for its provisions allowing the banning of protests and strikes and other attacks on workers’ democratic rights.

The doctors, nurses and others also demanded the payment of overdue salaries, the reinstatement of personnel specializing in COVID-19 and a clear policy for the provision of vaccines. The latter demands have assumed increased importance as a third wave of the pandemic is spreading through the country.

The Health Ministry has called the strike “criminal”—though emergency services remained in force—and threatened striking health workers with sanctions.

More protest actions by Belizean public sector workers against proposed pay cut

Protest actions begun in April by public sector unions in Belize against a government-proposed 10 percent pay cut have continued. On May 4, members of the Belize National Teachers Union drove autos and rode in chartered buses to protest in Belize City. The

Nurses Association of Belize announced on that day that it would hold a go-slow on May 5.

Some other unions, including the Belize Energy Workers Union (BEWU), Association of Public Service Senior Managers, and the Public Service Union, the Belize Progressive Teachers Union and the Christian Workers Union, have joined in the protests. On May 7, teachers marched in the rain in Belize City against the pay cut, while nurses held a protest at the Northern Regional Hospital in Orange Walk. At the latter, police accosted a Love FM reporter, roughed him up and arrested him, charging him with assault.

The unions, however, have characterized the controversy as an “anti-corruption” issue, and have made a raft of “good governance” cost-cutting suggestions to which government bargainers have responded with various legislative proposals while refusing to budge on the cuts. As negotiations drag on, union members have been presented by the bureaucrats with drafts of whistleblower asset recovery and campaign finance legislation as well as a proposed promissory note supposedly to make up for the cuts sometime in the future.

A leaked draft of a BEWU press release said that the union would strike only as an absolute last option and urged the unions and government to “seek out mediation as an option to resolve the dispute,” according to an amandala.com report.

Marathon declares impasse in Minnesota work stoppage

Marathon Petroleum declared an impasse in negotiations with the Teamsters Local 120 as the work stoppage at its St. Paul Park, Minnesota refinery is well into its fourth month. The announcement came in a letter dated April 29 in which the company called the Teamsters’ proposal to its last offer a “non-starter.”

The declaration of an impasse could set the stage for the company to impose its demands, which include the right to subcontract union jobs out to low-wage firms. The union says the change would cost it 40 of the 200 bargaining unit jobs at the refinery.

The Teamsters called a strike back on January 26 after workers rejected the company’s demands by a 167-4 vote. Then, 24 hours into the strike, the union ordered workers to return to work with the company refusing entry. The union now calls the work stoppage a lockout while the company says it is still a strike.

The Teamsters leadership’s conduct, combined with a toothless boycott and isolation of the strike from any other section of the working class, demonstrates it has no strategy to win the strike. Instead, it launched a diversionary campaign aimed at Marathon’s shareholders to obtain a defeat of an executive compensation proposal.

The shareholders’ opposition to grotesque compensation packages will not result in any support by stockholders for workers’ demands. Instead, the announcement of a \$242 million first quarter loss by Marathon will only redouble resistance to any concessions to workers.

Despite COVID-19 “third wave,” Ontario Labour Ministry refuses to order shutdowns

In further evidence that the pandemic policy of the Conservative Ontario government of Premier Doug Ford is to place the profits of the corporations over the well-being of the population, the provincial Ministry of Labour reported that between January and April little was done to close dangerous workplaces.

Although the ministry found over 15,000 infractions of safety guidelines and issued 450 tickets out of some 19,500 workplace inspections, only 24 stop-work orders were dispensed. A stop-work order is issued whenever inspectors judge there is an immediate risk to a worker’s wellbeing.

With Ontario now in its “third wave,” the most dangerous yet, major outbreaks since January have been declared in warehouses, mail sorting stations, auto plants, meatpacking plants, retirement homes, transit depots and hundreds of schools. Even when the number of workers sickened in a facility climb into the hundreds, government inspectors have been reluctant to order a shutdown. In some instances, after weeks of escalating sickness and death, temporary shutdowns have been instigated not by reluctant labour officials but by local public health authorities.

Last spring, during the province’s first wave of the coronavirus, autoworkers in Windsor took matters into their own hands and walked off the job citing unsafe conditions. That unofficial job action quickly spread across the border to US auto plants forcing a complete shutdown of the auto industry for almost two months.

But in a back-to-work drive organized by the auto companies with the full support of the provincial and federal governments and the unions, the legally guaranteed right to refuse unsafe work was cast aside. During that first wave, only one work refusal was ratified by government officials out of the first 300 claims filed.



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