

## Electrical workers in Puerto Rico strike over inadequate COVID-19 protections

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

### Latin America

#### **Puerto Rican electrical workers strike over COVID-19 demands, government contract**

The Puerto Rican Electrical Industry and Irrigation Workers Union (UTIER) union called a walkout May 12 over inadequate anti-COVID-19 measures. UTIER representatives had visited a number of work sites and found rampant lack of compliance with safety protocols. Among them were the taking of temperatures, social distancing, disinfection of work areas, provision of personal protective equipment and available soap and hand sanitizer.

UTIER also repeated its demand that the government cancel its contract with LUMA Energy to provide electricity to the island. The union says that the contract will raise rates and take away workers' rights and pensions, while giving LUMA the right to leave if a hurricane, earthquake or other disaster occurs. It called on the legislature to override Governor Pedro Pierluisi's recent veto of a resolution that postpones the contract.

#### **Belizean public service workers, teachers strike over pay cut**

Members of the Belize National Teachers Union and the Public Service Union struck last week to demand the rescission of a 10 percent pay cut and a freeze on raises for public sector workers approved by the nation's legislators. In Belize City, picketers marched to and gathered outside the House of Culture, site of a meeting of cabinet ministers. Protests also took place in Belmopan, Benque Viejo del Carmen and other cities.

Union officials, meanwhile, have been in negotiations with government representatives. They have characterized the nation's fiscal crisis as the result of corruption and inefficiency and claim that it can be alleviated by various "good governance" legislative measures.

#### **Dominica: college educators and staff strike over long-festering grievances**

Faculty and staff at Dominica State College (DSC) on the island of Dominica went on strike May 10 over demands that have been ignored by the administration for years. Among their grievances, some of which date back to 2014, are poor working conditions, discrepancies in contracts and a decrease in their monthly base pay from 4,000 to 3,200 East Caribbean dollars (US\$1,480 to 1,184).

Workers point to the lamentable state of infrastructure: lack of furniture and doors in classrooms, no electricity in some rooms, no library, auditorium, computer rooms, or technical/vocational workshops. Other complaints regard the actions of the college president, who unilaterally imposed a three- to five-year probation period before eligibility for permanent employment and has yet to pay a three percent raise dating to the 2017-18 school year.

When the workers gathered at the DSC compound that day to hold a protest, the Commonwealth Police Force and security personnel prevented the action and escorted them off the campus. They were informed that they had been fired as well. They then held a protest outside the DSC grounds, displaying placards and chanting. Both Prime Minister Dr. Roosevelt Skerrit and the minister of Housing and Urban Development berated the protesters, alleging that they had callous disregard for the students and were driven by political motives. Since then, meetings involving the cabinet secretary, the administration and the Dominica Public Service Union have been scheduled. DSC staff have resolved to stay on strike until there is a resolution.

#### **Venezuelan nurses protest for national vaccination plan, better pay and conditions**

Nurses across Venezuela held protests on May 12 to demand that the government come up with a national vaccination plan. They also demanded a salary raise and better working conditions, including improvements in infrastructure and provision of medicine and supplies.

The protests, which coincided with National Nurses Day, were held in at least 15 states, according to the national nurses union.

#### **Argentine public transport workers strike for overdue wages**

The UTA public transport workers union in Rosario, Argentina began an indefinite strike May 15, following the city's lack of response to its demand for the payment of 50 percent of April wages on May 13. Since the stoppage encompassed urban, interurban and medium-distance

transport, it impacted bus and rail services in a radius of about 200 km (125 mi.) around the city.

The main demand is for payment of wages for April, but also includes travel expenses and a quota agreed to during parity talks last year. In the case of some medium-distance firms, wages are four months overdue.

## **United States**

### **Sunbury, Pennsylvania school staff strike against concessions**

The 63 support staff for the Shikellamy School District in Sunbury, Pennsylvania began a strike May 14 to protest the district's plan to impose \$600,000 in annual cuts on secretaries and aides for classrooms and lunch rooms. The Shikellamy Education Support Professionals Association and the district have been in negotiations since January 2020 and have failed to reach an agreement.

The district has now asked a professional service company to submit proposals to replace school support personnel. Meanwhile, the district has reassigned staff members to fill positions vacated by strikers.

Union President Jodie Kovaschetz calculated that the district's concession demands will amount to almost \$3 million in wages and benefits in the course of the next five years.

### **Food processing company locks out Fresno, California workers**

Some 45 workers were ordered off the premises of the Stratas Foods processing plant in Fresno, California on May 4 after contract negotiations broke down. Management escorted workers out of the plant after members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 6 voted down the company's final offer.

Stratas is trying to claim the union is on strike, while the ILWU charges the company with locking workers out. Union Business Agent Corey Tacconi said workers had put up with too many "low-ball" offers "and the membership decided we're not taking it."

The original contract expired back in March of 2020 and was extended for one year. Both sides confirm that wages are the sticking point, but no other details are available. Currently, the company is attempting to maintain production with management personnel.

Stratas Foods has nine plants in six states. The company asserts it is "the leading supplier of fats, oils, mayonnaise, dressings and sauces to the Foodservice, Food Ingredients and Retail Private Label markets in North America."

### **Nurses picket Enloe Medical Center in Chico, California**

About 40 nurses picketed outside the Enloe Medical Center in Chico, California on May 14 to draw attention to a number of safety issues that contrast poorly when compared to surrounding hospitals. Members of the California Nurses Association (CNA) complain that their facemasks are not medical grade, and other protective equipment is of poor quality.

They are also concerned over infection control protocols and safe staffing levels.

Referring to past regional disasters such as the Camp Fire of 2018, registered nurse Lisa Seynowa told KRCR TV, "We live in an area that's been affected by natural disasters too many times recently. So as a rule of thumb we should have three months of PPE on hand."

Besides these issues, the CNA has been negotiating for six months on a new contract on behalf of 1,000 Enloe nurses. The old agreement expired in March. Management is currently offering a wage package that freezes wages in the first year, followed by three percent increases in the second and third years.

## **Canada**

### **Federal Liberal government subsidizes strikebreaking operations**

The Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been providing special pandemic relief funds for private corporations to subsidize expenses companies have incurred to impose lockouts and break strikes. Analysis of payouts provided to corporations under the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) program shows that monies were used by companies to pay for strikebreaking operations.

The CEWS program allows for companies reporting a drop in revenues over the course of the pandemic to receive government relief to cover a large portion of wage outlays. Companies do not need to explain how or even if the reduction in profits was related to COVID-19 impacts. Already a number of companies who experienced labour stoppages due to strikes or lockouts have collected funds. To date, over 1,200 complaints over the use of CEWS funds have been filed with the federal government.

One of the most egregious cases is that of the Federated Cooperatives Ltd. (FCL) oil refinery in Regina, Saskatchewan. FCL locked out about 750 workers in December 2019 in a power play designed to wrest massive contract concessions. That lockout spanned almost seven months with the dispute settled at the end of June 2020. Over the course of the dispute, FCL operated a scab camp inside the facility that housed hundreds of replacement workers. It regularly used helicopters to fly scabs and supplies in and out of the compound.

To oversee its scab-herding operation, FCL acquired the services of several companies, including the notorious anti-worker, anti-strike international security firm AFIMAC. In addition, the company used right-wing independent truckers to break blockades and leaned heavily on the police, the courts and the Saskatchewan government of Scott Moe to smash worker resistance. In the end, with Unifor, the union organizing the locked out workers utterly prostrate before FCL, a contract was rammed through that eviscerated pensions, benefits, jobs, and work rules across the board.



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