

Chiapas, Mexico teachers protest mass jailings; further Manitoba Hydro worker job actions blocked by labor board

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

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

Teachers, parents in Chiapas, Mexico, staged a protest to demand the release of 95 incarcerated students arrested by police for demonstrating

On May 20, about 500 teachers of the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE), families, friends, students and members of social organizations protested to demand the freedom of at least 95 incarcerated students of the Mactumactzá Normal School in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, Mexico. The detainees were part of a group of 250 students who protested on May 18 to demand improvements in education.

Due to the lack of internet access for many of the students, most of whom are between 18 and 20 years of age, the young people demanded that entrance exams be available in person. The students had bused in from the school to a tollbooth, where they blocked the highway. Federal police arrived, attacked them with tear gas, and arrested at least 74 women and 21 men. They were charged with mutiny, gang activity, robbery, disturbing the peace, vandalism and other acts of violence.

The students were held in preventive detention, ruled as legal by a control judge, who was backed up by the State Attorney General's Office. A hearing date was set for May 25.

The parents, supporters and CNTE teachers marched with signs and chants from the town center of Cintalapa to the El Amate prison, where the students are being detained, and held a rally to demand the students' immediate release. Speakers denounced Governor Rutilio Escandón, a member of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's Morena party, for his "open provocation against the CNTE" and accused the police of excessive force and sexual harassment.

Belizean public sector workers strike over pay cut completes third week

Members of the Joint Unions coalition—the Belize National Teachers Union, Public Service Union (PSU) and the Association of Public Sector Senior Managers—continued their strike last week in opposition to a recently legislated 10 percent pay cut and freeze on future raises. The industrial action has included marches, street blockades, a brief demonstration in front of the prime minister's home, and mock funeral

processions symbolizing, in the words of PSU Vice President Dean Flowers, "putting corruption to death."

Couching the strike as a campaign for "good governance" could provide an opening for backtracking on the pay cut, which the government, while making "overtures" to negotiate, has adamantly refused to rescind. Despite the overwhelming support that the continuation of the strike has gotten from the membership, PSU President Gerald Henry "said that the members of his union were willing to accept at least one year of an increment freeze and a year of the 10 percent salary cuts if the government could put in place measures to lessen the impact of these measures on their ability to sustain themselves," according to a May 19 amandala.com.bz report.

Meanwhile in Belize City, air traffic controllers and other workers at the Philip Goldson International Airport walked out May 19 over management's placing of four workers in the Civil Aviation Department on administrative leave. The department's director accused them of reckless behavior, negligence and planning sabotage for arriving late for work on May 15, but the air traffic controllers claimed that mechanical failure of their vehicles caused the tardiness. The PSU stated that it is ready to appeal the case to the Supreme Court.

Salvadoran bus drivers suspend work over employers' pressure to raise fares

Bus drivers in the city of San Miguel in eastern El Salvador suspended work on May 19 to protest owners' demands that they raise fares beyond the amount authorized by the Transportation Vice Ministry. The drivers ply two routes between San Miguel neighborhoods and the University of El Salvador.

One driver, who remained anonymous for fear of reprisal, told reporters that he considered the owners' demands not only illegal—and would make the drivers subject to fines—but unjust for the passengers, in a country where the poverty rate is 40 percent. He added that the drivers were not paid what they should be and appealed to the Transportation Vice Ministry to investigate the fare demand.

Costa Rican educators hold virtual strike to demand vaccinations, continuation of school year

Four educational unions, as well as social organizations in Costa Rica, called a national strike, both in classrooms and online on May 24 to

demand vaccinations for all educational employees and the continuation of classes, which the Public Education Ministry has suspended.

The ministry announced that the 2021 school year, which had begun on February 8 in a hybrid format, would be suspended from May 24 to July 12 due to the high number of cases and deaths from COVID-19. On May 18, 48 deaths, a record for one day, were reported. The average daily death toll last week was 26 in a nation of five million. The end of the school year will be extended to January 2022.

Union spokesmen said that the main reason for the strike, held online and titled "Day of Life" (Jornada de la Vida), was to honor workers and students who have died due to the pandemic, but there were also demands raised. The unions called for immediate vaccination for all education sector workers, massive testing of teachers and students nationwide during the suspension, and increased investment in the development of online learning technology.

United States

Workers strike Tonawanda, New York plant over wages and pensions

On May 17, 180 workers at the Unifrax Corporation plant in Tonawanda, New York went on strike as the company and United Steelworkers Local 2058 failed to reach an agreement on a new contract. The two sides are deadlocked on pensions, wages and workers opposition to a lower-tier pay rate for new hires.

The old agreement had been extended during the pandemic through January. On February 1, the company declared an impasse and implemented its final contract offer.

Unifrax, which fabricates ceramic insulation products, has 37 manufacturing facilities in 12 different countries.

Salem, New Hampshire music store summarily closed after workers protest lifting of masking requirement

Management for the Bull Moose chain of music stores promptly closed its Salem, New Hampshire, store May 21 and fired its 20 employees. Workers charged the closure came in rapid response to opposition to management's scrapping of mask requirements for employees and customers.

Bull Moose management lifted the masking requirement without any consultation with workers. On May 20 employees met with management to air complaints about harassment from customers during the pandemic who objected to masking. The next day, the company announced the closure and firings with a statement declaring: "We are not able to share the reasons behind our decisions regarding the Salem store ..." and added, "this decision had absolutely nothing to do with masks or face coverings for employees or customers."

William Boisvert, who was fired from the Salem store, told the *Press Herald*, "We have had people fighting us on the mask policy since the beginning, and those people who have been fighting us since the beginning probably haven't been vaccinated and would probably lie about being vaccinated and come in and spread COVID to us and other customers."

Kameron Brooksmoore told WMTW News that workers reacted to the announcement, thinking, "Maybe we should do something about the mask mandate, and we had only been talking about a walkout or a strike on Monday when it was supposed to be implemented."

Mackenzie Keefe, who formerly worked as a manager at Bull Moose's Portsmouth, New Hampshire store, said workers had quit during the pandemic over the company's policies in dealing with COVID-19. "It was definitely like pulling teeth to get any support from them," he told the *Press Herald*. Bull Moose, which operates 12 stores in Maine and New Hampshire, closed its Portland store in November 2020.

Austin, Texas retail store concedes pay increase in wake of strike by nonunionized workforce

Owners of the retail health beverage JuiceLand stores in Austin, Texas, made concessions one day after nonunion workers launched a strike closing five of the stores and forcing management to curtail hours at two others. The company increased pay from \$12.50 an hour to \$15 for front-of-house workers and increased pay for commissary teams to \$17 an hour.

The workers' Instagram page, Juiceland Workers Rights, declares: "For too long the Juiceland production facility workers have endured unsanitary, rough working conditions, and no hazard pay during the pandemic. As a result, we have made a list of demands and are currently not working as we negotiate with Juiceland."

Workers are demanding \$50 monthly bonuses for employees who worked during the pandemic, transparency in pay between workers and management salaries, and something termed worker-led managerial evaluations.

Canada

Manitoba Labour Board ends Hydro strike

A two-month rotating strike by 2,300 Manitoba Hydro workers was ended on May 13 after the provincial Labour Board ordered the dispute terminated. Workers had engaged in sporadic and isolated rotating job actions and protests since the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) abruptly ended an all-out work stoppage after only two days this past March. The Labour Board will begin hearings to settle the dispute on July 7.

The IBEW had signaled the government and Hydro management since the beginning of the dispute that its goal was to seek an arbitrated settlement. In Manitoba, provincial labour law allows for the Labour Board to end a strike or lockout after 60 days. The Conservative government of Premier Brian Pallister has introduced legislation to strike that provision from the labour code. IBEW Business Manager Mike Espenell welcomed the intervention by the Labour Board.

Early on in the dispute, Espenell had made it clear to reporters that the IBEW was "just trying to minimize the disruption for our customers." As far as union wage demands were concerned, he made it clear that the union would not necessarily insist on a wage deal that even covered inflationary increases. The union is trying to achieve basic cost-of-living increases, he told reporters, or "anywhere close to that."

The hydroelectricity workers have been without a contract for over three years. An earlier rejected contract offer from the Crown Corporation provided for a retroactive wage freeze in the first two years of a four-year contract, with a 0.75 percent increase this year and a miniscule 1 percent raise in 2022. In addition, there would be no restoration of three days of unpaid wages unilaterally stripped from workers last year on the pretence it was needed to pay for COVID-19 expenses. The claw-back was equivalent to a 1.25 percent wage cut in 2020.

That proposal mirrored almost exactly the Conservative government's 2017 unlawful wage restraint legislation. But last year, a provincial court, calling the bill "draconian," struck down the legislation as an infringement on the constitutional right to free collective bargaining. However, the government has appealed the decision and insisted that public employers negotiating with any public sector union continue to follow the wage restraint advice outlined in the original legislation.



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