

NEA staff strike union Washington D.C. headquarters; Uruguayan workers hold nationwide strike

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

One-day strike by Uruguayan workers over incomes, jobs, health care and other issues

Thousands of workers across Uruguay struck for 24 hours on June 17 against the policies of the right-wing government of President Luis Lacalle Pou. The mobilization was organized by the PIT-CNT federation under the slogan “Against hunger and inequality, for workers and wages, in defense of life.”

The capital, Montevideo, was the site of a caravan of autos, motorcycles and bicycles through downtown, culminating in a rally in Plaza Independencia. From there, a number of high-level union bureaucrats delivered a letter with a list of demands to the Executive Tower.

Among the demands were: a basic emergency income to counteract the devastation wreaked by the pandemic; strengthening of measures to fight the virus; raising of wages; improvements of the health care system; greater investment in social programs; an end to privatizations of public enterprises; and investment in housing.

The mobilizations also provided an opportunity for gathering signatures to demand a referendum on the Urgent Consideration Law, a raft of anti-worker measures passed last July.

Argentine port workers strike to demand vaccinations

The Industrial Corridor Maritime, Port and Related Inter-Union (Impaci), a group of port unions in San Lorenzo, Santa Fe province, Argentina, carried out a strike June 18 to demand that all terminal workers be given vaccinations against COVID-19. Impaci has issued pleas on several occasions to the local, regional and national governments for the vaccinations, but has gotten no response.

An Impaci communique noted that, being classified as “essential workers,” its members have worked throughout the pandemic, and that they have been “patient” up to the present. Now, “with the constant arrival of vaccines, and the ostensible advance of vaccination plans for the general population,” the authorities must listen to their “legitimate demand” for the vaccine.

The statement further said after the strike, depending on the response of the authorities, “the conflict, suspension, continuity, deepening and/or

geographic extension [of the strike] will be analyzed.”

With a population of 45 million, Argentina has had over 4 million cases and 87,200 deaths from COVID-19. As of June 17, 13.6 million people have received the first dose and 3.5 million have been inoculated twice.

Bolivian doctors hold two-hour strike for overdue pay, against firings

Doctors and other health workers in Bolivia held a two-hour strike in various regions in Bolivia on June 18. Since Bolivia is going through a third wave of COVID-19 infections, with more than 3,000 cases and more than 100 deaths, the doctors kept the strike limited.

The executive secretary of the Public Health Medical Branches Syndicate told reporters on June 17, “La Paz is entering into a strike for no more than two hours, in consideration of the population. We would have every right to take a stronger measure but, for the sake of the population, we are not doing it.”

A critical demand is the payment of salaries for some 3,600 health workers who were hired in January through March to handle COVID-19 patients during the second wave of the pandemic. Instead, “they [the government] are dismissing colleagues all over the country.”

The brief stoppage took place in Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, and Oruro, among other locations. Provision of supplies, equipment and medicine were also among the demands.

Saint Lucia: Senior citizens’ home staff fired for protesting working conditions

Workers at the Comfort Bay Senior Citizens Home in Vieux-Fort, Saint Lucia held sickout protests last week over low pay, dreadful working conditions and other complaints. The response by management was to fire them and hire replacement workers.

The list of workers’ complaints is long: understaffing, poor pay, lack of transportation facilitation, and lack of communication by management among them. Regarding understaffing, a June 10 loopnews.com report quoted one staff member who said, “Some staff has to be mopping, emptying the bins and cooking when they are not employed to do that type of work. We are working like donkeys.”

Comfort Bay relies on financing from the government, and two days after the loopnews.com report, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Equity Velda Joseph visited the facility, kindling hopes that she would bring about some necessary changes. Instead, several employees were

sacked, and replacements were hired.

A June 16 loopnews.com report on the firings concluded, “When contacted, the General Secretary of the St Lucia Civil Service Association (CSA) Claude Paul said he is on leave and does not know much about the current situation. He directed this reporter to contact the acting general secretary, who could not be reached after repeated attempts were made.”

Bermudian industrial union calls work to rule to protest decertification law

Members of the Bermuda Industrial Union (BIU) worked to rule from June 11 to 17 to protest a new law regarding decertification of unions. The law, an amendment to the Trade Union Consolidation Act, went into effect on June 1.

The measure was promoted by supporters as “a significant advancement” in workers’ rights, and originally allowed both former supporters and opponents to initiate moves to decertify a union. The BIU, the Bermuda Public Service Union and other unions voiced objections and strike threats regarding percentages required to initiate the vote and to pass the vote, as well as who should be eligible to vote.

The Labour Ministry made some adjustments, such as allowing workers in a union shop to pay 50 per cent of their dues to charitable organizations and 50 per cent to the union, whereas before, they could pay the entire amount to charities. But in key aspects, the ministry held to its original positions. For example, in an agency shop, i.e., one in which nonunion workers pay dues, those workers will be allowed to vote.

In an implicit acknowledgement of the function of unions, the BIU claimed that the law “could spark major industrial unrest,” according to a report in *The Royal Gazette*.

Regarding further actions by the BIU, they have not yet been decided upon. According to BIU president Chris Fulbert, “The divisions are now meeting individually and then we will decide on any further steps.”

United States

NEA staff strike Washington D.C. union headquarters

Staff workers at the National Education Association’s (NEA) headquarters in Washington D.C. voted last week by a 98 percent margin to authorize its union to call a strike. The National Education Association Staff Organization (NEASO) characterized bargaining by negotiators for the NEA with a “slew of anti-union delay tactics.”

The NEA, like its counterparts in school districts across the nation claimed it was “negotiating in good faith” and blandly stated that “we disagree with NEASO’s characterization of our positions,” without detailing their objections.

NEASO president Robin McLean issued a statement, declaring, “Let us make this clear: NEA is the largest union in the country, and its managers are asking staff to accept stagnant pay now and well into the future at a time when inflation and the cost of living are skyrocketing. NEA Management is also trying to hike health care costs and slash retirement benefits that were promised to employees who dedicated their careers to the union’s mission.”

Portland, Oregon painters carry out picketing as bargaining over

wages begins

Representatives from Painters Local 10 and the Portland, Oregon-area Signatory Painting Contractors Organization (SPCO) began negotiations June 15 on a wage re-opener under a federal mediator. The bargaining follows a series of unfair labor practices picketing by the union’s 440 members at a number of Portland construction sites.

At the first picket, which took place at McDaniel High School back on May 21, not only did painters refuse to cross picket lines, but some 120 other building trades workers from a dozen different unions also refused to cross. When a picket on June 1 produced similar results, union officials pulled back and have picketed sites where only painters are laboring.

Painters charge that last year’s \$2.62 pay hike has not brought their wages into line with inflation and are demanding significant increases. But the employers’ group is balking and protesting that the uncertainty of the economy prohibits meeting painters’ demands. When the union asked SPCO to produce a schedule of future contracts, the employers refused, leading to the unfair labor practices strike.

Bellingham, Washington cold storage workers strike to protest health care cost increases

Workers at the Bellingham Cold Storage facility in Bellingham, Washington began a 30-hour strike June 18 to emphasize their opposition to alterations in their health care package. Teamsters Local 231, which represents the 110 striking workers, said the company’s health care proposal “would force our members to pay an absurd amount of their medical premiums out-of-pocket.”

Workers are not satisfied with the company’s offer on wages and pensions as well. The union is trying to limit the strike in an effort to convince the company to return to bargaining after workers rejected by an 80 percent margin what the company considered its final offer.

The Bellingham Cold Storage, which houses seafood processing and food storage operations, was purchased in 2018 by the investment firm Joshua Green Corporation. Joshua Green Corp purchased the Bellingham facility in part because of its location between Vancouver, Canada and Seattle, Washington, and access to international ports.

Canada

Toronto health care workers strike against poverty wages

In a strike that highlights the absolute contempt for its workforce by health care management, about 70 Black Creek Community Health Centre workers withdrew their labor last week after negotiations for a new contract failed to reach an agreement.

The low-wage frontline workers, members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), struck after management refused to present an offer to union negotiators.

Workers at the Centre have been without a contract since March 2020. Laboring throughout the pandemic, they have provided vital medical assistance, information, testing and vaccinations to a large working class area of the city.

Bowing to the regressive 2019 wage control legislation of Ontario Premier Doug Ford’s Conservative provincial government, OPSEU had counseled the workers to limit their demands to the miserly one percent a

year wage rise permitted by the government along with strengthening bereavement leave language in any new contract. Currently, the year-over-year inflation rate is 3.4 percent.

However, Centre management negotiators refused to finalize a contract offer based on these demands, cynically claiming that the union must “prove” government funds are available. As Centre management continues to stonewall workers, Black Creek Community Health Centre Executive Director Cheryl Prescod has increased her own salary by \$30,000 since ascending to the position in 2017. In addition, over the past three years members of Prescod’s management team have seen their salaries rise by 17 percent.

OPSEU, along with 40 other unions under the umbrella of the Ontario Federation of Labour, have followed the diktats of the Conservative’s Bill 124 and negotiated contracts according to the wage restraint provisions. Instead of mobilizing the 270,000 public sector workers in general strike action against Ford’s attack on the basic democratic right to free collective bargaining, the unions have launched a challenge to the legislation in the Ontario Supreme Court. The challenge echoes that launched by Manitoba unions.



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