

Argentine bus drivers strike to demand payment of yearly bonus; lockout of refinery workers in Beaumont enters second month

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Argentine bus drivers strike to demand payment of yearly bonus, higher wages

Bus drivers in Argentina's northern city of Corrientes began a strike June 30 to demand the full payment of their end-of-year bonus, or SAC (*Sueldo Anual Complementario*: Annual Complementary Wage) from 2020 and parity with the national wage for transportation workers. The stoppage went ahead despite the declaration by the Labor Subsecretariat that it was illegal.

The drivers, employed by the ERSA transportation corporation, opposed the division of the SAC into three parts, which the UTA transportation union had agreed to, and demanded full payment, as has been the practice for decades.

ERSA denounced the "self-summoned" (*autoconvocados*) workers for taking direct action without union involvement and threatened that they would be sanctioned. On July 1, UTA reps from the neighboring province of Misiones arrived to meet with ERSA negotiators to "untangle the conflict."

On July 2, UTA and ERSA announced an agreement to pay the SAC and the national scale—in two stages—and called off the strike. The company said that it would not fire or cut salaries of the striking workers. ERSA spokesperson Javier Harfuch "acknowledged that the arrival of the Misiones UTA representatives served to untangle the conflict," according to a diariolibertador.com report.

Government of Argentina heads off brief strikes by health workers, decrees arbitration

Argentina's Labor, Employment and Social Security Ministry decreed "obligatory conciliation," i.e., binding arbitration, June 30 for the Sanidad private health care workers union, preventing four-hour strikes called for July 1 and 2. Union head Norberto Maschio told reporters that the strike call was due to stonewalling on the part of the health care enterprises in regard to Sanidad's demands.

Sanidad is calling for a salary raise of 45 percent with "no loss due to inflation" and the delivery of "the bonus for Sanidad workers that the national government announced," which was never paid. Maschio pointed out that in response to workers' complaints, the only "response" from the employers was to bemoan "the problems of financing that they have." He also told reporters that the health workers "didn't have a home office and went to work since the beginning of the pandemic" and that "many died and very many got sick."

The ministry issued a plea to the employers to "abstain from taking

reprisals of whatever type against the personnel by the union organizations and/or whichever other person."

Panamanian dairy product workers strike over company wage proposals

Workers in Panama employed by the Estrella Azul dairy products processing company began a strike on June 25. The workers, members of the SITEEA dairy industry workers union, walked out over wage adjustments which the firm had proposed after its October 2020 acquisition by Grupo K, a dairy products transnational based in Honduras.

After three months of negotiations, Estrella Azul proposed that, instead of an annual raise of 10 cents per hour, the raise would be for three cents per hour beginning in 2022. (The Panamanian balboa is tied to and interchangeable with the US dollar.) In lieu of the higher raise, company negotiators offered a yearly bonus of 75 balboas. Management, ignoring Panamanian labor laws, argued that in Honduras the pay rate was lower.

The workers voted 92 percent against the proposal and went on strike. On June 30, the Convergencia Sindical federation, to which SITEEA is affiliated, and other unions held a protest in front of the Labor and Labor Development Industry Ministry (Mitradel) to demand respect for labor rights and the right to strike.

Meanwhile, dairies, milk transport and other businesses contracted by Estrella Azul, mouthing concerns for their workers—and for cows—clamored for government intervention. On July 2, under Mitradel threats of the imposition of binding arbitration, Convergencia Sindical announced the end of the strike and the reaching of an agreement with Estrella Azul. According to the terms of the agreement, the annual raise will start at 4.5 percent and reach up to 18 percent after four years.

Jamaican doctors stage sickout over staffing, pay issues

Doctors at health care facilities in three parishes in Jamaica called in sick July 2 over a number of grievances. Out of 302 doctors scheduled to work at hospitals and clinics covered by the Southern Regional Health Authority (SRHA), only 104 showed up. Several clinics were closed and services at hospitals were restricted to emergencies and surgeries.

The doctors stayed home because of the conditions, including delays in payment of some salaries as well as gratuities; working without signed contracts; and job insecurity. The government and the Jamaica Medical Doctors union had held talks on June 29 and 30 without resolving these

issues. The contracts of nearly 150 doctors in the SRHA system expired on July 1 with no guarantees that they would be offered contracts.

Mexican copper tubing plant workers walk out over firing of union delegate

About 280 workers at the Golden Dragon copper tubing plant in Monclova, a city in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila, went on strike the evening of June 29 to demand the reinstatement of a union delegate. Management claimed that Jonathan Romero Carrillo, who has been a Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) delegate at the plant for three years, could not justify 3,000 pesos (US\$152) in travel expenses, resulting in his sacking.

The strike began at the start of the evening shift, as workers were getting off buses, then refused to go inside the plant. The company called the Civil Police and Municipal Preventive Police, but no incidents were reported. Management attempted to get workers to return to the job, claiming that there would be no reprisals, but the workers did not budge. On June 30, *La Prensa de Coahuila* published an article saying that Golden Dragon was hiring workers for 300 positions.

In addition to their opposition to the sacking of Romero Carrillo, workers have voiced dissatisfaction with conditions at Golden Dragon: a dining area unfit for eating; unsanitary conditions in other areas; shortages of cleaning personnel; and the need for a training program. The last demand has been raised since a recent accident resulted in a worker losing a finger.

Coahuila CTM director Tereso Medina Ramírez's statements revealed a mixture of defensiveness alongside wariness that the strike could get out of the control of the union. He declared that the action was a "labor stoppage [*paro*] outside the law" and not a strike (*huelga*), and stated, "This is about our delegate and the CTM will support him and make the appropriate assessment. Of course, we do not agree with this kind of firing for any of our workers." He then added, "I'm making a call for sanity to our worker comrades; doing labor stoppages at businesses is not the way to go."

Bahamian electrical workers hold brief walkout, protest unfair treatment

Employees of the Bahamas Power and Light Company (BPL) walked off the job and held a demonstration June 28 outside the company's headquarters. The BPL workers are members of the Bahamas Electrical Workers Union (BEWU), which accused BPL of practicing favoritism; giving unfair promotions; mishandling the COVID-19 pandemic; denying benefits to deserving employees; unseriousness in negotiating a new contract; foul-ups in payment of wages; and a "unilateral disrespectful attitude" toward the workers and the union.

The BEWU claimed the support of other Bahamian unions, including the National Congress of Trade Unions. BEWU president Kyle Wilson said that the company would have 14 days to resolve the complaints, after which the union would take action, including appeals to the Industrial Tribunal, the Supreme Court or industrial action.

Workers strike Tennessee's Arnold Air Force Base over wages,

benefits and disability

Some 690 workers at the Arnold Air Force Base in Tennessee went on strike July 2 over wages, benefits and the preservation of a disability program. Jimmy Hart, president of the Air Engineering Metal Trades Council (AEMTC), which covers the striking workers, told the *Tullahoma News* that workers are demanding "wages that bring us up above inflation. We need to maintain our health care benefits at a reasonable cost, and we need to maintain our disability."

The workers perform a wide variety of labor at the Arnold Engineering Development Complex, which, according to the Air Force, houses "more than 68 aerodynamic and propulsion wind tunnels, rocket and turbine engine test cells, environmental chambers, arc heaters, ballistic ranges, sled tracks, centrifuges and other specialized units."

Hart said there were between 30 to 50 severely injured workers at the base and that company demands to cut disability were "non-negotiable."

"If you're familiar with Arnold Air Force Base and the job that gets done in there, it's a very, very dangerous job, and workers get hurt all the time," said Hart. "Sometimes they get severely hurt. We have a disability plan, which three years ago was cut from a 24-month plan to an 18-month plan, and the company is trying now to cut it further."

Walkout by New Orleans public workers to protest low wages and poor working conditions

Ten workers from the city of New Orleans Department of Public Works refused to work June 28 protesting cheap wages and terrible working conditions. The workers represent two-thirds of the field maintenance group, a subdivision of the 243 workers in the public works department. Workers are angry that while the city council voted to raise city contract workers to \$15 an hour in the next two years, it left workers directly employed by the city mired in hourly wages as low as \$11.21.

The workers, who repair potholes and clean out the city's drainage system, are also indignant about the lack of equipment such as protective glasses when working with asphalt and masks to avoid exposure to fumes. Eric Gardner told *The Lens*, "It's a safety issue. It's so hot out there. We're dealing with asphalt that will burn your skin off."

Workers also complain about the lack of air-conditioning in their vehicles. Darryl Eggerson revealed, "The seat belts don't work, the windows don't roll down, the brake lights don't work."

Low pay plagues workers across the city, such as trash haulers, restaurant and hotel workers and public venue workers at the Superdome. Workers have declined to return to COVID-19-infested work environments and are the target of both Democrats and Republicans, who have striven to dismantle the pandemic's \$300 supplemental federal unemployment benefits in order to force workers back under poverty wages.

Dill Pickle Foods Co-op workers in Chicago go on strike

Workers at Dill Pickle Foods Co-op, a community grocery store in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood, walked off the job last Friday to protest wages and working conditions. About 65 workers at the store are organized by the Industrial Workers of the World. Workers on strike are demanding hazard pay for work during the pandemic and the

reinstatement of a coworker who was allegedly fired after raising concerns about working conditions. Co-op management has claimed that it cannot meet workers' demands due to "financial crisis."

The strike follows a walkout in April in which workers picketed to raise awareness of their grievances against management. Dill Pickle Foods workers have filed unfair labor practice complaints with the National Labor Relations Board that "accuse management of bad faith bargaining, improperly disciplining employees and changing the terms of the union contract without authorization," according to the website Block Club Chicago.

Food service workers walk out at Portillo's Food Services in Chicago suburbs

Food service workers at a production facility owned by Portillo's Food Group in Addison, Illinois, a suburb west of Chicago, walked off the job last week. Workers at Portillo's Food Services prepare food for sale at 47 Portillo's restaurant locations throughout the Chicago area and are not represented by any union. At least 17 workers stopped work for five days to demand safer working conditions and overtime pay. The work stoppage culminated with the workers traveling to the company's headquarters in the River North area of Chicago for a press conference. The event was organized with the help of Arise Chicago, a faith-based organization, according to the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

Portillo's workers have denounced management's appeals to meet with workers individually to discuss their grievances as an intimidation tactic and said that they had been sent letters threatening to fire them if they did not return to work after walking out. The workers walked out after they were forced to work significantly longer hours but did not receive overtime pay. They are demanding higher wages, overtime compensation, and that the company hire more workers to cover sick shifts.

St. Paul Park, Minnesota oil refinery strike ends

Workers at Marathon's oil refinery in St. Paul Park, Minnesota ratified a new contract July 1, bringing the five-month strike and lockout by about 200 members of Teamsters Local 120 to an end. At the heart of the contract struggle was a company demand to contract out 40 of the 200 jobs at the refinery.

The Teamsters claim that the new agreement will limit the use of outside contractors. Marathon management released a statement that said the agreement "contracts out only one, non-safety sensitive job," and called the pact a "mutually satisfactory, six-year labor agreement."

Workers voted by a margin of 167-4 to strike last January. Then, 24 hours into the strike, the union ordered workers to return to work while the company refused to admit workers, converting the strike, according to the union, into a lockout.

The locked-out workers would remain isolated for its duration, while the union proposed a toothless consumer boycott limited to Speedway gas stations in the Twin Cities metropolitan area that are supplied by Marathon.

Lockout of ExxonMobil refinery workers in Beaumont, Texas enters second month

As the lockout of workers from ExxonMobil's Beaumont refinery and packaging and lubricants plant, company officials and representatives from the United Steelworkers union (USW) both claim they are still "far apart" on key demands. Workers have gone six months without a contract after the previous one expired in February.

The bargaining committee, covering about 650 locked-out workers, met with corporate representatives Wednesday, but ExxonMobil said no new proposals were considered. Instead, the company continued to claim it was "bargaining in good faith" but there were still disagreements on the details of a long-term contract.

ExxonMobil continued to offer its original contract proposal that it has presented to the union since before workers were locked out of the complex on May 1. However, workers have opposed the company's proposals because it seeks to change the way seniority would work at the Beaumont complex, and a key position the USW has said is essential to safety. According to the company, seniority-based job bidding impacts an estimated 25 percent of all job moves for USW-affiliated workers.

Union officials presented ExxonMobil with at least five contract proposals, but the company claimed each of them would "significantly increase" costs and did not meet its objective to become "more competitive."

Two-month Toronto strike at bottle packaging plant ends

Thirty-five workers, member of the United Steelworkers (USW) at the Rexplas bottle packaging plant in Toronto voted to accept a new contract on June 27, ending a two-month strike at the facility. The workers, mostly women who have immigrated from India, were demanding a 2 percent a year wage increase. Most earned slightly above the Ontario minimum wage of \$14 (CDN) per hour.

The plant is owned by Richards Packaging Income Fund. Management had opened contract negotiations with a zero percent wage offer. The highly profitable company saw revenue grow by \$69 million due to increased sales of health care bottles during the pandemic. Profits had steadily increased even before the pandemic hit, prompting executives to hike their bonuses by 180 percent in 2020. Deploying a scab workforce over the course of the dispute, the USW and the company eventually settled on a miserly 4.5 percent increase spread over four years.



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