

Nurses strikes loom in Canada, Dominican Republic; Miners continue strike in Mexico; Health workers to begin strike in Bolivia

Workers Struggles: The Americas

12 July 2021

Canada

Strike looms as Alberta government demands wage “roll-back” for provincial nurses

The Alberta Health Service (AHS) has demanded that the 30,000 provincial nurses accept a 3 percent cut in wages, the elimination of scheduled lump sum payments and reduced shift and weekend premiums in contract negotiations currently underway. The cuts would amount to more than a 5 percent reduction in compensation for the members of the Alberta Nurses Union. The move is an additional provocation against the nurses. Only last March, the AHS—an arm of the right-wing United Conservative government of Premier Jason Kenney—had demanded a four-year wage freeze.

Should nurses move towards a province-wide strike, a number of preliminary steps are required according to provincial labor law. First, an essential services agreement would need to be reached, a program of mediation would need to be exhausted, and then a 14-day “cooling-off” period would be invoked before a strike vote and job action could be undertaken.

The attack on the nurses is part of an offensive against all public sector workers. The UCP government intends to reduce the province’s annual public sector wage bill by \$700 million or 3.5 percent by 2024. When inflation is taken into account, the total cut will be on the order of 10 percent.

The decimation of public health care produced by the government’s austerity measures will be used as a pretext to push for a vast expansion of private for-profit medical care. At last year’s UCP annual general meeting, delegates voted in favor of creating a privately funded and privately managed health care system. The Kenney government’s plans to privatize 11,000 health care jobs are part of a much broader austerity agenda, aimed at generating the funds necessary to offer massive tax breaks and subsidies to the super-rich.

In response to these plans, health-care workers launched a wildcat strike last October that was quickly ruled illegal. Workers were forced back onto the job after the Alberta Union of Public Employees refused to back the workers’ action.

Latin America

Nurses in the Dominican Republic warn of strike if demands not met

At least three nursing unions in the Dominican Republic have warned of possible strike action if the government does not respond positively to their demands. The presidents of the Dominican Nursing Professionals College, the National Nursing Association (Asonaen) and the IDSS (Dominican Social Security Institute) Nurses Association held a press conference in which they outlined their complaints and demands.

Asonaen President Francisca Peguero slammed the recent 30 percent raise unilaterally imposed by the authorities because, she said, it was inconsistent and discriminatory. The raise was not applied to nurses in provincial locations, to workers in the National Council of Aging Persons and the National Emergency System, or to technical and supervisory personnel. She said that the raise provoked “a great generalized unrest” among health workers.

Nurses have complained of overwork and contracts for those working with COVID-19 patients that only last three or six months, instead of permanent positions. The unions are also calling for a 100 percent raise—40 percent this year with 20 percent over each of the next three years—and a raise in pensions, which now stand at about US\$140 per month.

Mexican mineworkers continue strike over contract violations

More than 500 members of the SNTMMSSRM national mineworkers union remain on a strike they began on June 18 at the Los Filos-El Bermejil open-pit gold mines in the Mexican state of Guerrero. The complex, one of the most important in Latin America, is owned by the Canadian firm Equinox Gold. According to the workers, only about 20 nonunion workers by day and 12 on the night shift are working the mines.

Among the management violations cited by the mineworkers are the nonpayment of a productivity bonus for May and June, a yearly bonus that management claims is not in effect due to the pandemic, and other compensation that was never paid. Workers requested anonymity when talking to reporters out of fear of retaliation.

Equinox claims that the strike and blockade of the mines are illegal and has posted an “administrative act” at a mine entrance demanding that several workers named by the company come to meetings on July 15 and 16 so that it can charge them with “acts related to the suspension of work without the employer’s

authorization.” It has also threatened massive firings.

The workers have asked for the intervention of SNTMMSSRM leader Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, who is also a senator: “We have already sent the summons to strike, and we want you to support us, our negotiating committee has also been appointed,” they said in a recent press conference. There has been no indication so far that the longtime union boss has responded.

Ecuadorian teachers march to demand suspended raise

About 150 members of the National Educators Union (UNE) marched through downtown Guayaquil, Ecuador, on July 8. The protest was called to demand the reinstatement of a raise in the Organic Law of Intercultural Education. The increment was put into effect on April 10 but was suspended by the Constitutional Court on May 21 after it was challenged as unconstitutional.

UNE officials had asked to meet with President Guillermo Lasso, who promised on June 2 that he would have a discussion with them about the suspension on July 8. Since then, the right-wing president, who took office May 24, has not communicated with them. The court should decide on the constitutionality of the raise this week.

Bolivian health workers federation issues strike call to demand firing of head of National Health Fund

Bolivia’s National Social Security Workers Federation (Fenesegeural) announced July 8 that it would begin an indefinite national strike July 12. The strike was called to press for the dismissal of the head of the National Health Fund, Silvia Gallegos.

Workers accuse Gallegos of poor administration and mishandling of the fund’s budget. They blame her for shortages of medicine and supplies.

Fenesegeural had attempted other means, including a 48-hour strike in June, to put pressure on the authorities, but agreed to a cooling-off period on June 30. Since then, the government has not communicated any response to the demand.

United States

Raise approved after Elizabeth City, North Carolina municipal workers strike

The Elizabeth City council reversed course and granted a 4 percent raise after municipal workers carried out a two-day strike starting June 29. The strike was sparked by an earlier vote by the city council that rejected a raise tied to an increase in property tax.

The workers initiated their strike by manning trucks and proceeding to City Hall where they surrounded the building. “We are tired of being under-appreciated by this city,” Tommy Hopson told WAVY news, reflecting the dissatisfaction of workers who are paid as low as \$12 an hour. Daryl Staton added, “You’re trying to provide for your family and stuff, like, it’s important for everyone. We just want to be treated equally and fairly.”

The strike by city workers comes on the heels of the killing of Andrew Brown, a black man who was shot in the back of the head by an Elizabeth City policeman in April.

Barbers launch pay strike at Fort Lee, Virginia

About 20 barbers went on strike against a Fort Lee contractor in the first week of July. The barbers, who are members of the Laborers International Union of North America, charge that Sheffield Barbers, which obtained the contract to operate three barber shops at Fort Lee, cut pay by \$1 an hour when they took over at the base.

Sheffield Barbers then raised the price of a haircut from \$12.15 to \$13 without increasing barbers’ pay. One striker told the *Progress-Index* he was losing nearly \$1,000 a month since Sheffield had taken over. The contractor is also accused of deducting the cost of vacuums from barber’s pay, an item for which the contractor is supposed to take responsibility.

Sheffield is a Missouri-based company that as of 2018 held contracts at seven military bases.

Manufacturer of COVID-19 test kits slashes 2,400 jobs in Maine and Illinois

Abbott Labs, a manufacturer of COVID-19 testing kits, announced last week it will lay off 400 workers at two Maine facilities. The announcement follows a June 1 decision by the company to close its Gurnee, Illinois plant, which resulted in 2,000 job losses.

The recent Maine cuts will see 300 jobs jettisoned from its Westbrook facility and another 100 jobs axed from its Scarborough plant. The company blames the job cuts on a sharp decline in testing that has impacted profits from the sale of its kits that provide rapid test results to determine COVID-19 infection.

The decision to severely cut back production comes as infections from the COVID-19 Delta variant are on the rise in many parts of the United States. Abbott Labs is a Fortune 500 company. Its chairman and CEO Robert B. Ford saw his total compensation increase by 72 percent in 2020 to \$20 million.



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