Puerto Rico longshore union calls off job action; Strike against Rio Tinto continues in British Columbia

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.

Longshoremen's union bows to lawsuit, ends strike by Puerto Rican dockworkers

The International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Local 1740, which represents dockworkers in Puerto Rico's Port of San Juan and the stowage company Luis Ayala Colón Sucres, Inc. (LAC), reached an agreement August 4 that put a halt to a strike that began July 17. The strike had prevented the unloading of thousands of containers and the Port Authority's ability to collect more than $400,000 in fees and tariffs.

The ILA called the walkout because LAC had implemented a new technology system to enter data but refused to hire personnel to perform these functions. Instead, the employer chose to use supervisors, undermining the jobs of the specific unit.

In a one-hour meeting at La Fortaleza, the governor's mansion, the ILA conceded to the agreement after the island colony's Ports Authority filed an injunction lawsuit and threatened to call on the Biden administration to intervene. Although the back-to-work order is supposedly in effect for 45 days, Interior Secretary Noelia García stated that the lawsuit will not be withdrawn until the "de facto negotiations conclude in a favorable manner for the operation." Labor and Human Resources Secretary Carlos Rivera Santiago said, "We have the guarantee that before those 45 days there will be no other stoppage."

LAC handles 80 percent of import/export shipping in Puerto Rico, and business interests have complained that its near monopoly has made it susceptible to strike action that can bring traffic and profits to a virtual halt. Manuel Reyes Alfonso, executive vice president of the Chamber of Marketing, Industry and Distribution of Food, urged the government to open the port to other companies to "dilute the risk that a labor dispute in a single company will impact the entire population."

Mexican teachers block tunnel to demand payment of bonuses

On August 6, about 200 members of the National Education Workers Coordinator (CNTE) blocked a tunnel of a highway leading to the commercial center of Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico. The teachers demanded that the state government deliver on the second fortnightly payment of wages due on July 30, as well as bonuses owed from last year.

According to the CNTE, more than 32,000 teachers in the state have not received their most recent salary, as well as bonuses totaling up to 600 million pesos (US$30 million) from 2020. The administration of the nominally left PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) Governor Silvano Aureoles has ignored their demands.

Union officials accuse Aureoles, whose six-year term ends on September 30, of letting the issue stew in order to unload it on incoming Morena party Governor-elect Alfredo Ramirez Bedolla.

The teachers have carried out protest actions since August 2, which the CNTE says will continue this week. Union officials have met with representatives of other Michoacán teachers unions that have also been stiffed by the state government. CNTE has appealed to the federal government to intervene.

Antigua and Barbuda: Bank employees strike, protest breaks down in negotiations

Tellers and other line staff workers at two Caribbean Union Bank (CUB) branches in Antigua and Barbuda walked out August 4 to protest the snail's pace of negotiations and management's unseriousness about salary increases. The negotiations with the Antigua and Barbuda Free Trade Union (ABFTU) have dragged on since 2019.

ABFTU President Samuel James accused CUB of not taking workers seriously and using the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse for withholding raises. He told reporters that "there are certain top officials in this country that are making proclamations that the Caribbean Union Bank is doing so well and that it was in a position to pay dividends to its investors, but when you meet behind closed doors, the information that you are getting is starkly different to what is being pronounced publicly."

The ABFTU had recently proposed an interim salary raise of a mere three percent, but management claimed to already have had something in place, which it did not reveal. There was also similar stalling over unused sick pay and mutual separation packages.

ABFTU and CUB bargainers met the next day without making any progress. The union called the workers back on the job August 6 and expressed hopes that CUB would accept an expected recommendation from the Labour Department.

Protest planned in Ecuador against declining living standards

A number of organizations in Ecuador issued a call August 4 for

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nationwide protests against the worsening economic situation, rooted in government policies, for working-class families. The mobilization is planned for August 11 and includes the Unitary Workers Front, the National Educators Union and the General Workers Union of Ecuador as its main organizers.

Marches are set to begin at 4:00 p.m. The principal targets of the protests will be the rise of fuel prices, lack of employment and government inaction in the face of the crisis. Two laws also figure in the protests.

The misnamed Humanitarian Support Law, passed in the spring of 2020 under the guise of a response to the pandemic, has weakened labor rights and imposed cuts in workers' pay and hours. Organizers have accused the right-wing government of using COVID-19 as a "smokescreen" to carry out these attacks.

The Organic Law on Intercultural Education, legislated in 2011, had originally eliminated students' and teachers' rights, but due to a mobilization and petition campaign of teachers, over half of its provisions were either legislatively eliminated or altered to restore those rights, as well as guarantee more investment in education, in April this year.

The government has blocked enactment of the new provisions by appealing to the Constitutional Court, claiming they are unconstitutional and is refusing to engage in dialogue.

United States

Nevada transit workers launch strike over health care, safety conditions

Some 200 drivers for the Reno-Sparks, Nevada, transit system went on strike August 3 after the Teamsters union declared it had reached an impasse in negotiations. Teamsters Local 533 cited "unresolved unfair labor practice charges, bad faith bargaining, contract violations and refusal to arbitrate disputes" in launching the strike against the Keolis Corporation. Keolis, a multinational contractor with 63,000 employees worldwide, runs the transit system for the RTC (Regional Transportation Commission—Washoe).

Management is offering wage increases of three percent in both the first and second years of the contract, while gutting 39 safety and workers' rights articles from the old agreement. Among its demands is the right to hire an unlimited number of permanent temporary workers.

Earlier in July, workers called in sick at significant levels, causing the RTC to cancel routes. Keolis set up a subcontractor that hired permanent temporary drivers. Unlike other drivers, after 90 days they did not automatically become part of the bargaining unit. The wife of former Reno general manager, Abul Hassan, owns the subcontracting company.

The pandemic is also playing a role in the antagonism between the workers and Keolis. The company has refused to implement local, state and federal masking and social distancing recommendations to lessen the spread of COVID-19. The union also reports Keolis refuses to provide information on the dozens of workers, who contracted coronavirus, including two who were admitted to intensive care. The Teamsters are charging that the transit system has become a super-spreader.

What appears to have been the main driver behind the Teamsters' bureaucracy in calling the strike was Keolis's attempt to undermine the union health care trust. According to the Teamsters, the company has submitted contract language that will allow it to cancel the Teamsters-controlled fund within a 60-day period. Earlier this year, the union filed suit charging the company with failing to pay more than $50,000 into the health care fund.

Virginia Kroger workers protest health care cuts

Grocery workers have been conducting protests at Kroger supermarkets in Virginia over the past two weeks to make clear their opposition to any health care cuts in the current round of bargaining. Kroger wants to get rid of a health care trust fund that is mutually managed and subject to contributions by both the company and the United Food and Commercial Workers union.

Kroger is angling in the current negotiations to assume complete control over the fund. "There are many ongoing issues with the fund, and the company is trying to address these in negotiations," said a company statement.

"I just want to try to get the best health care coverage I can get for myself," said Claudia Villa Lovos, a cashier at the Kroger store in Mechanicsville, Virginia, told Virginia Public Radio. "I'm getting older … and I want to make sure that I have good health care in case anything were to happen to me.

"Working under the pandemic is no joke," she continued. "You never know who you can run into that can carry it and pass it onto you."

Las Vegas nurses protest unsafe staffing ratios

Nurses at MountainView Hospital in Las Vegas, Nevada held a protest August 4 to call attention to unsafe staffing ratios as the state enters another surge of the coronavirus. "MountainView has had time to prepare for this COVID surge, and here we are yet again short staffed, and patient care is jeopardized," said MountainView registered nurse Melissa Hansvick in a statement released by National Nurses United.

Nicole Taylor, another RN, stated, "When you come to a hospital run by the country's largest and most profitable health care corporation, you expect top-of-the-line patient care. That is not what you get when you come to MountainView."

The health care giant HCA Healthcare owns MountainView. It operates 186 hospitals and another 2,000 clinics and other urgent care facilities across the United States and in the United Kingdom. The company's profits for the 12 months ending June 30, 2021 were just under $4 billion.

HCA Healthcare's chief medical officer for Nevada and California admitted that in three of its hospitals, including MountainView, intensive care units are at or near capacity. The Nevada Hospital Association said seven of its hospitals were reporting a surge in COVID-19 cases above licensed bed counts, and five hospitals had staffing shortages. Nevada Governor Steve Sisolak was compelled to restore an indoor mask mandate for 12 of 17 counties, regardless of vaccination status.

Canada

Rio Tinto strike in British Columbia continues

Nine hundred workers, members of Unifor Local 2301 in Kitimat, British Columbia, are entering the third week of a strike against aluminum producer Rio Tinto. Talks between the Australia-based multinational, which is the third largest mining corporation in the world, and union representatives began on June 7. When the Kitimat aluminum smelter and powerhouse workers walked out on July 24, bargaining between the union and company ended.

Management is attempting to enforce aggressive cost-cutting measures,

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even though the company raked in net profits of US$9.8 billion in 2020. Workers, for their part, have indicated they are determined to overturn a series of union-endorsed concessions imposed in previous contracts and to defend job protections and pension rights. They are also determined to put an end to the employer's drive to gut working conditions by systematically violating the contract—a practice that has led to some 300 outstanding worker grievances.

Many of the grievances concern the company's ever-expanding use of temporary contract labour, its denial of benefits to the temps by manipulating their hours of work and its refusal to grant workers hired since 2019 defined-benefit pensions.

Last Friday over 1,000 members of the local community marched in a "Save the North-West" protest, jointly organized by local businessmen and several union members. The city of Kitimat was planned and built by the Aluminum Company of Canada (Alcan) during the 1950s. In 2007 Rio Tinto acquired Alcan. Much of the area's population continues to be largely dependent on the Rio Tinto operation for ancillary jobs and spending on services in the North-Western British Columbia town. Union members and business speakers at the rally called on both parties to re-start bargaining.

No union officials spoke at the rally to build support for the strike. Officials of the local union have not made any public statements since releasing their contract demands on July 27, three days after the strike began. The local Liberal member of the Legislature has written to call on the NDP provincial government to intervene to end the strike. Rio Tinto is one of the largest single producers in the province. The government from the outset has required the strikers to allow nonunion workers and contractors into the smelter and powerhouse to perform essential duties. Nonetheless, production has been reduced to 25 percent of capacity.

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