

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 August 2021

Mexican health sciences researchers continue protests for contract

A group of health science researchers belonging to the Independent Health Scientific Research Workers Syndicate (SITIC Salud) held a protest August 18 at the National Palace in Mexico City. They entered the office of Citizen Attention of the Presidency of the Republic and handed over a petition asking President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) to intervene. SITIC Salud represents about 1,400 researchers nationally.

The protesters held picket signs saying, “Collective Contract Now!” and denounced the lack of job security, safe conditions, benefits and resources. The petition asked AMLO to assure that their human and labor rights “not be made vulnerable by the executive board of the National Institutes of Health and High Specialty Hospitals (INSHAE).”

Since 2019, the INSHAE board has denied their requests for dialogue and negotiations to draw up a collective labor contract, asserting that it lacks the power to negotiate contracts. The board claims that it is in the purview of the federal Health Secretariat (SSA). The SSA maintains that “each institute has its own personality and autonomy” to resolve their demands.

On August 11, SITIC Salud called a strike at six institutes, but two days later decided to enter “a state of active strike,” followed the ruling by the Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Board that the strike was “nonexistent,” i.e., illegal, because it considered that “there are already general working conditions.”

Argentine teachers’ strike over salaries in fourth week

Teachers in Argentina’s Salta province maintained their strike and protests that they began August 2 over wage demands last week. The striking teachers, who call themselves the Autoconvened Teachers of Salta, have declared themselves in opposition to the August 19 signing of an agreement by five teachers unions as a result of parity talks with the government.

The Salta teachers criticize the agreement as “no good,” because it does not keep pace with inflation and keeps teachers at or below the poverty level. The agreement will guarantee a minimum monthly wage of 39,000 pesos (US\$401) from October 1 and 40,000 (US\$412) for November 1 whereas the teachers say that the poverty level is now over 67,576 pesos (US\$695).

The teachers set up an encampment in the Plaza de 9 de Julio in the state capital, also named Salta. They will meet in an assembly this week to compose a statement and decide on further steps.

Costa Rican Social Security workers protest attacks on pensions

Health and medical workers for the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS) held a protest in the capital San José the morning of August 19. Nursing, security, cleaning, laundry, nutrition and surgery were among the departments affected in various hospitals and clinics. Emergency services and patient meals were continued, but most surgeries were suspended.

The action was called to protest the “reforms” to the pension system that will raise the eligibility age and cut the amount for pensions.

CCSS management declared some 612 workers on strike, thus providing a pretext for retaliation. Costa Rican labor law defines essential services in the medical and health care broadly, and CCSS authorities have said that they will take administrative and judicial actions against the striking workers. Since the protest had been announced several days before the walkout, management had already put contingency plans in place to blunt its impact.

Bahamian electrical workers walk off job, protest poor wages, conditions, policies

Workers for Bahamas Power and Lighting (BPL) walked off the job shortly after arrival on August 19 and protested outside its headquarters in Nassau. The electrical workers are members of the Bahamas Electrical Workers Union (BEWU). The demonstration is a repeat of a previous action in June over the same issues. These include contract, healthcare, insurance, ill treatment of the workers, promotions, workers’ rights and disrespect to the industrial agreement, according to the union.

BEWU president Kyle Wilson said that some of the issues had been resolved since the previous protest, but not all. Another critical issue is inadequate protection from COVID-19.

BPL issued a statement saying it “takes exception to the illegal industrial action, especially given the pressure placed on our customers by the COVID-19 pandemic” and “BPL is an essential service, and the other essential services—police, doctors, water and sewerage—all rely on BPL in order to serve their functions. This action by the BEWU places them at risk as well as those of our customers who are undergoing at-home care.”

BPL claimed that it has been negotiating terms of the industrial agreement in good faith but did not explain why a new one has not been agreed on since 2018, when the old one expired.

Several unions, including the Bahamas Nurses Association, the Bahamas Public Services Union, Bahamas Utility Services and Allied Workers, the Bahamas Educators Managerial Union expressed support

for the walkout.

Bolivian airport workers hold partial strike over restructuring

Workers for Bolivia's Airport and Auxiliary Aviation Services Administration (AASANA) held a protest and partial strike August 19 to protest restructuring of the industry and demand the dismissal of AASANA director Arminda Choque. International flights, according to Minister of Public Works Édgar Montaña, were operating "almost totally normally," though some national flights were suspended or delayed.

The workers went on strike in spite of an agreement between their union, the AASANA Workers Federation (FENTA) and AASANA that committed to the suspension of pressure actions and establishment of worker boards to get input related to the restructuring plan. Many workers, especially in the east, considered the accord to be against their interests. It had already resulted in some firings and early retirements.

The next day, Montaña declared in a press conference that operations were fully restored, and that FENTA and AASANA would hold a meeting over the workers' concerns. The negotiations will continue indefinitely, but he said that sacking Choque "won't be possible."

UAW terminates two-year long Pennsylvania strike

The United Auto Workers announced the termination last week of a strike by 90 workers at the Langeloth Metallurgical Company in Langeloth, Pennsylvania after two years on strike. "The local is pretty much dissolved," a UAW official told the *Observer-Reporter*.

Members of UAW Local 1311 went on strike back in September of 2019 after the company issued a final offer that would gut seniority rights. In January 2020, management hired replacement workers at the metal fabricating plant while the UAW isolated the strike and relied on appeals to the National Labor Relations Board.

In July 2021, the NLRB issued an unconditional return notification after the company declared it would not recognize the union. It is not clear whether any of the workers will get their jobs back as the replacement workers are permanent.

Langeloth Metallurgical is owned by Centerra Gold, based in Toronto, Canada. It operates mines in Kyrgyz Republic, British Columbia, Canada and Turkey.

Twin Cities window washers strike over safety and pay

About 40 window cleaners who scale skyscrapers in the Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota metro region went on strike August 16 demanding increases and the establishment of a fully-funded apprenticeship program in order to guarantee safety on the job. The Service Employees International Union Local 26 had agreed on some

tentative proposals in bargaining, but once the pandemic hit, two of the companies, Columbia Building Services and Final Touch Commercial Cleaning, reneged on terms.

Besides backing off the apprenticeship program, the companies also backtracked on reducing healthcare premiums from \$400 to \$200, and pay raises from \$3 to \$4 an hour over the course of a three-year agreement.

After the pandemic hit, workers were angered when they were ordered to clean infected offices without masks. Unlike other workers, they didn't receive hazard pay. Some contracted COVID-19, and this is partly driving their current demands.

Only 80 workers statewide perform window washing on tall buildings. In the last three years, three have died from injuries on the job.

Fuel and Tugboat workers refuse to service ship docked at strikebound Kitimat Rio Tinto smelter

A Norwegian freighter has been tied up at the docks in Kitimat, British Columbia since July 17, unable to receive refueling and tugboat services from workers in the local community who are refusing to cross the picket lines of 900 striking smelter workers. The cargo ship had arrived in port to receive a load of aluminum just as the strike began.

The refusal to service the ship is the second time along the British Columbia coast this summer that coastal workers have honoured picket lines. In June, 94 dockworkers in Prince Rupert, members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), were suspended without pay for one day after they refused to cross a picket line at the seaport on the province's northern coast. The disciplinary action came after the workers honoured a picket line at the terminal gate put up by protesters asking that the JPO Volans, an Israeli-owned container ship, not be moored and unloaded. The action came in the wake of continued Israeli bombing attacks on the citizens of Gaza.

The striking workers at Kitimat, members of Unifor, are in the fifth week of a strike against concession demands by the giant mining transnational Rio Tinto. Management is attempting to enforce aggressive cost-cutting measures, 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 temp workers by manipulating their hours of work and its refusal to grant workers hired since 2019 defined-benefit pensions.



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