Codelco copper miners in Chile end strike, while New Brunswick public sector workers threaten to strike

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Chilean copper miners unions end strike, sign agreement

The Industrial Union of Labor Integration and the Unified Workers' Union at Chile's copper producer Codelco's Andina mine signed a new three-year contract on September 3, ending a strike that began August 12.

The company did not agree to the main demand for a pay raise but will give an "end-of-negotiation bonus" of 4,495,829 Chilean pesos, or US$5,866, that is less than US$2,000 per year. Instead, according to a company statement, there will be "incentives aligned with production goals of the division and with the profound transformation through which the enterprise is living."

Chilean business park workers hold protest to demand earlier closing hours

Workers at Santiago, Chile's downtown Costanera Center, site of Latin America's largest shopping mall, protested September 2 over the late hours that they have to work. The protest was called by the Commerce Workers Alliance, composed of 15 unions, and has been part of a campaign that began at the beginning of August.

The protesting workers unfurled a huge banner inside the mall, which contains a Walmart among other businesses. They passed out a flyer that read: "To return to our homes with security, to have more time with our families, CLOSE UP COMMERCE AT 7:00." The flyer noted that business diminishes by the evening, and that earlier closures would not appreciably affect profits.

The mostly women workers often do not leave their jobs until 10:00 p.m., making them prey to assaults. They also are deprived of time with their families, adding to the stress of the long hours and insecurity from coming home late at night. As one worker told adnradio.com, "At the end, we end up worn out, mentally collapsed as well, by stress, thinking about things, that we actually don't have time to do anything."

Three-day strike by Argentine bus drivers presses demand for overdue pay, raise

Long-distance bus drivers in Argentina's Automotive Tramway Union (UTA) began a strike on August 27 to demand prompt payment of their wages. The UTA has also demanded a raise to keep pace with inflation.

According to a union statement, the bus company owners have been making partial payments of wages instead of the full amount, adding that, with the current inflation rate, "We're not going to permit poverty wages." The statement also accused the owners of "trying to make us drive more hours, with fewer drivers, skirting the law and making a joke of all workers' rights. They are trying to make us work in excess of the conventional workday, violating the conquests of decades of the organized labor movement."

The Labor Ministry called the union and companies to a hearing on August 31 to resolve the conflict.

Salvadorans protest adoption of cryptocurrency

Hundreds of activists from labor and social organizations in El Salvador took to the streets of the capital San Salvador on September 1 in the latest of a series of protests against the government's adoption of Tether, a cryptocurrency, as legal tender. The cryptocurrency, for which Salvadorans use the generic term bitcóin, will join the US dollar as a national currency on September 7.

The protesters, led by a group called the Popular Resistance and Rebellion Bloc (BRP), assembled across from the library of the Legislative Assembly in downtown San Salvador. They carried signs saying, "No to the bitcóin" and "No to corrupt money laundering" and demanded the derogation of the recently passed "Bitcoin Law" because, as a BRP communiqué said, "it will beat up the working class, the campesinos and rural communities."

The protesters included retirees, veterans, disability recipients and workers, who fear that they will be paid in bitcoins instead of dollars, and that the instability of cryptocurrencies could devalue or wipe out their already low pensions and savings. There is also fear that poor and rural workers might not understand how to use bitcoins and could be defrauded. Over 80 percent of small businesses have said that they do not want to process bitcoin remittances from abroad, which account for about 20 percent of El Salvador's GDP. The law obliges businesses to accept it as currency.

Guatemalan truckers block Belize crossing over increased fees

Truckers, who pick up and transport corn and other commodities from Belize to Guatemala, blocked the entry point at the former's western border crossing Spanish Lookout for three days last week. The truckers began the action on August 30 to protest the rising costs of fees.

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A typical Guatemalan trucker crosses back and forth two or three times a week and is required to take a COVID-19 test each time and pay for a customs guard. The guard escorts the trucker to the loading point, makes sure that he or she does not leave the vehicle or have any contact with farmers, and provides the trucker with food and drink during the loading. Since the truckers go through this procedure regularly, the fees add to already rising operating costs, bringing on the blockade and the demand that they be given a break.

Corn exports to Guatemala come to about 50 million pounds per year, and the Customs and Excise Department was under pressure by the Belize Grain Growers Association to resolve the logjam. Customs issued a letter September 2 telling the truckers that the customs guards would no longer escort them, but that the COVID-19 tests would still be required and charged. Traffic in and out of Spanish Lookout resumed that morning.

Mexican municipal workers protest nonpayment of wages, benefits

A group of contract workers and pensioners for the city of Felipe Carrillo Puerto in Quintana Roo, Mexico struck and blocked access to the city council building on August 23 to demand payment of wages and benefits. The workers had not received their salaries, as well as their vacation contributions, for the last four fortnightly pay periods called quincenas.

The protesting workers gathered at the city council entrance with signs, some citing federal labor law, demanding their overdue pay and criticizing Mayor José Esquivel Vargas and the city council. The city council agreed to meetings with worker representatives to find a solution. However, many workers were dissatisfied and continued the occupation. By September 1, the group had grown to over 100 workers.

The strike and protests continued until September 3, when Esquivel Vargas addressed the workers. He browbeat and threatened them, “I hired you, I gave you work … you should appreciate that because at the beginning of my administration I didn’t reject you.” He then told them that they would be paid for three quincenas and that within 15 days, the last payment would be delivered. As for anybody who did not accept those conditions, “you should quit.”

St. Louis nursing home workers carry out a one-day strike to protest low pay

Nursing home workers at the Blue Circle Rehab and Nursing facility in St. Louis, Missouri carried out a one-day strike on September 2, calling attention to low pay and short staffing. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which has been negotiating a new contract for 11 months, is calling for a $15 an hour wage for the approximately 25 striking workers.

Currently, dietary and housekeeping workers make only $10.30 an hour, while nurses make $13.00 to $14.50 an hour. In 2020, the lower-paid workers received a mere $9.45 an hour, and the rise to $10.30 was due to an increase in the state’s minimum wage.

Staffing shortages plague the facility, and the low pay leads to constant high turnover. Workers are also demanding safer working conditions. The SEIU is seeking to collaborate with management through a joint labor-management committee to deal with health protections.

Blue Circle Rehab is owned by Blue Circle Holding. The company owns two other nursing homes in St. Louis, one of which is also in negotiations, but the SEIU has not seen fit to unite nursing home workers with other health care workers in a joint struggle.

Omaha, Nebraska caseworkers strike over “broken” foster care system

Three foster care caseworkers went on strike against Saint Francis Ministries in Omaha, Nebraska, charging low pay and a complete lack of concern for working conditions and the safety of children. Darinita Shannon told KETV they are “under-trained, overworked, overwhelmed.”

Shannon, 27 years old, related that she had to take a 14-year-old boy to a hotel and stay there with him due to a lack of any other option. “We don't have foster homes. There’s no one here that wants to take the youth,” she said.

Saint Francis Ministries claims the inability to find a home for a child “happens very infrequently,” but admits that foster homes in many states are struggling to find a sufficient number of homes where children can be placed.

The three caseworkers say the foster care system is broken and will continue their vigil until someone steps in to rectify the situation.

Four-day strike at Chicago-area food distribution facility ends

The four-day strike by 125 members of Teamsters Local 703 at the Sysco warehouse in Des Plaines, Illinois, ended September 2 after the union and the company reached a tentative agreement. Details of the final agreement were not available.

The Teamsters said the decision to strike, which received a 99 percent backing from workers, was called out of frustration with talks that had been stalled since January. Another 200 Sysco drivers, members of Teamsters Local 710 refused to cross Local 703’s picket lines.

The Des Plaines food service warehouse is a major supplier to Chicago-area restaurants, schools and health care facilities. Sysco, based in Houston, Texas operates 343 distribution centers worldwide and is the largest food distributor in North America.

New Brunswick government breaks off negotiations as public sector workers prepare to strike

New Brunswick’s Conservative government has broken off negotiations with Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) officials negotiating new contracts on behalf of 22,000 provincial public sector workers.

The workers, who include health care, education, N.B. Liquor Commission workers and other provincial government employees, are set to hold strike votes beginning this week.

Provincial Premier Blaine Higgs issued a statement Friday denouncing the workers’ demand for “catch-up” wage increases after years of austerity. He claimed they would cost more than double what the government can afford to pay and accused the union of refusing to “engage in meaningful negotiations … which is very disappointing.”

The union, for its part, said government negotiators had “refused to respond” to a counteroffer it had given them Thursday.

Earlier this year, CUPE announced it was giving the government 100

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days ending September 7 to negotiate contracts without the threat of worker job action. This despite the fact that some of the workers have been working without contracts since 2016 and all of them since 2019.

New Brunswick public sector workers are among the lowest paid in the country.

Claiming the pandemic has devastated the province's finances, Higgs announced last December that his government could only afford to give the public sector workers wage increases totaling 3 percent over four years. This would constitute a massive real terms wage cut, since inflation is currently running at well over 3 percent annually.

Among working people, there is widespread sympathy for the public sector workers, especially the health care workers who have borne the brunt of the fight against pandemic. On August 29, demonstrations in support of the public sector workers were held in 14 communities across the province.

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