

1,300 copper mine workers in Utah set to strike

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

Workers protest Ecuador privatization policies

On Wednesday March 23 workers carried out a national mobilization across Ecuador against the privatization of public companies. The unions belonging to the Unitary Worker Front (FUT) are accusing the government of President Guillermo Lasso of favoring the privatization of the economy. Specifically, the unions reject the privatization of the Bank of the Pacific, the creation of pro-corporate public-private alliances, the privatization of education and health services, and multi-decade tax holidays for foreign investors.

The demonstrators also demanded wage justice and decent jobs to offset the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, workers called for the defense of the Social Security retirement system.

Striking miners block Peru's Central Highway

On March 24 and 25 striking laid-off miners and their supporters blocked Peru's Central Highway in Peru's Huancayo province to protest the Chinalco Copper Mine Company.

The strikers blame the mining company for take-overs of smaller mining companies that have recently resulted in the sacking of 1,000 miners, and attacks on wages and working conditions in violation of existing contracts.

Striking teachers and subway workers in Brazil protest police repression

On March 28 striking Belo Horizonte education workers joined with striking subway workers to protest the repression of teachers the previous Friday by the government of Belo Horizonte Mayor Alexandre Kalil, when a rally of 30 striking teachers was attacked by Municipal Shock Troops. The assault resulted in the injury and arrest of Wanderson Rocha, a strike leader.

Provincial and municipal teachers in Belo Horizonte, in the state of Minas Gerais, have been on strike over wages since March 9.

Belo Horizonte subway workers are on strike against the privatization of the municipal transit system.

At the protest workers carried signs calling for the unity of both strikes.

Mexican truckers protest fuel prices and high tolls

On Tuesday March 22 members of the Mexican Alliance of Transport workers carried out strikes and caravans in cities across Mexico, including Cancun, Ecatepec, Cuernavaca, Aguascalientes, Veracruz, Monterrey, Acapulco, Tulum and Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

Among the issues raised by the truck drivers is safety on roads, modernization of the truck and bus fleets, prohibition of double trailers, and end to extortions by police and government officials, and lower highway tolls.

Members of the truckers' organization Amotac staged a protest outside the lower house of federal Congress in Mexico City. In addition to fuel prices and tolls truckers have pointed to extortion at the hands of police. Additional protests were held the next Day in Mexico City's central square.

Amotac released a number of demands including lower fuel costs and tolls, no new transport taxes, and a ban on double articulated vehicles which it said had resulted in increased accidents and thousands of deaths.

United States

1,300 copper mine workers in Utah set to strike

Thirteen hundred workers at the giant Rio Tinto Kennecott copper mine near Salt Lake City, Utah are set to strike when their five-year labor agreement expires at midnight Thursday, March 31. The workers, who include heavy-equipment operators, line operators and maintenance workers at the Bingham Canyon Mine, recently rejected a contract proposal agreed to by the United Steelworkers, the International Union of Operating Engineers, the International Association of Machinists and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

Workers are seeking substantial wages increases, not one-time signing bonuses, to offset the sharp rise in living costs in the Wasatch Front, the metropolitan region that includes Salt Lake City, West Valley City, Provo and other cities where the majority of the state's residents live. Housing prices have jumped 23.6 percent in Salt Lake County, with the median single-family home selling for \$580,000 in February. Average gas prices in the state are \$4.43 a gallon, 20 cents higher than the national average.

Workers rejected the company offer of a \$1.18 an hour raise over five years, which they say is even less than the pay bump that contractors at the mine received. "We are asking for an increase," Ted Gunderson told the *Salt Lake Tribune* during a rally outside of the company headquarters

last week. “We put our lives on the line every time we’re up there.”

Rio Tinto, which bought Kennecott Utah Copper’s assets in 1989, is a massive UK and Australian-based multinational corporation and the world’s second-largest metals and mining corporation. The company made \$21 billion in profits last year, more than doubling its 2020 profits. The price of copper, a key metal for energy generation, transmission, and storage, including for the rapidly expanding electric vehicle battery production, has risen from \$2.19 a pound on March 30, 2020, to \$4.74 on Monday.

The USW and other unions have sold out a series of recent strikes by mining and smelter workers: including the two-month strike last year by 2,400 workers at Vale Inco’s nickel, copper, cobalt and precious mining complex in Sudbury, Ontario; a two-month strike in 2020 by 950 workers at Rio Tinto’s Kitimat aluminum smelter and the Kemano power plant in northwest British Columbia, Canada; and a 10-month strike in 2019-20 by 1,800 Asarco workers in Arizona and Texas.

Strike by Sherwin Williams workers in Bedford Heights, Ohio in third month

The 55 workers of USW Local 14919 are nearly approaching their third month on strike at a Sherwin-Williams paint and chemical manufacturing facility in Bedford Heights, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. The contract expired on November 20 of last year, and the walkout belatedly began on February 5.

Worker demands for increases to wages and benefits to match the mounting cost of living and reflect the record profits they’ve made for the company have gone unmet. The USW trade union kept the workers on the job for three months after the expiration of the contract. The USW has 850,000 members in the US and Canada.

It was announced this week that the US Senator for the state of Ohio, Democrat Sherrod Brown, who also happens to be the chair of Senate Banking Committee, would make an appearance this Friday at the picket line along with some union officials. The AFL-CIO-backed North Shore Federation of Labor is reporting that the pro-company USW has proposed a 4 percent wage rise, a nominal wage cut considering the current inflation rate is at near 8 percent and forecast to go higher into next year.

Oxfam study says one out of three US workers makes less than \$15 an hour

A new study released March 22 by Oxfam America reports an average one out of three workers in the United States makes less than \$15 an hour. The report says when filtered by minorities and women, that percentage widens even further.

Some 25 percent of men make less than \$15 an hour while 40 percent of women fall into that category. The total affected falls just under 52 million workers.

The national minimum wage was set at \$7.25 an hour in 2009. The Raise the Wage Act, which proposes setting a \$15 an hour minimum wage, is stalled in Congress.

According to USAfacts, “It would take one \$15 an hour employee 506 eight-hour shifts—just under two years if working every weekday—to earn what the average US family spends in a year. ... The average US family, defined here as the middle 20% of income earners spent \$60,777... in 2018”

Canada

Molson Coors brewery workers strike in Quebec

After voting by 99 percent for strike action, 420 workers at the Molson Coors brewery in Longueuil, Quebec on Montreal’s south shore struck this past weekend after rejecting the company’s miserly wage offer. The offer fell well below the burgeoning inflation rate in the province, which is nearing 6 percent a year. Management is also demanding increased mandatory weekend shifts, obligatory overtime, and the destruction of the seniority system when layoffs are determined. The workers are organized by the Teamsters.

The strike comes as Molson’s sales continue to increase year over year. The beverage conglomerate’s net sales rose from \$9.7 billion in 2020 to \$10.3 billion in 2021, which was an increase of 6.5 percent. In the most recent quarter, sales jumped 14.2 percent to \$2.6 billion US dollars. After a fourth-quarter profit of \$90 million, Molson’s increased its share dividend payments to stockholders by 12 percent. Last year the company eliminated 190 jobs when it moved to the new Longueuil facility.

Molson’s demands follow closely on a contract forced on 320 Toronto brewery workers in the wake of a six-week lockout last year. After a bitter struggle where management had moved to employ scab labor, workers ratified a new contract April 3 by a narrow 149-117 margin. The deal, recommended by the bargaining team of the Canadian Union of Brewery and General Workers, was disparaged by most rank-and-file workers. But ultimately workers voted to accept the agreement, which was similar to one they had decisively rejected prior to being locked out, because they realized their union was both unwilling and unable to lead any struggle against the company.

The company insisted that most Toronto workers be moved from a defined benefit pension program to an inferior defined contribution plan based on the vagaries of the stock market. The move was part of a steady drive to greatly increase the number of workers laboring for inferior second-tier wages and benefits. In addition, management put an end to the eight-hour day and traditional overtime payment provisions.



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