

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Argentine university professors hold 24-hour strike against inadequate salary hike

Professors at the National University of Rosario in Argentina's northern Santa Fe province launched a one-day strike May 13 to voice their rejection of the salary agreement reached between the national government and the National Confederation of University Teachers (CONADU) for 2023. The strike was led by the COAD professors and researchers union.

The agreement signed by CONADU provides for a 41 percent raise divided into two tranches. According to a COAD statement, "The salary guideline agreed by CONADU with the National Government was, already in March, clearly insufficient. Today, in light of the escalation of inflation in recent months, its negative impact on the purchasing power of our salaries is evident." It added that a previously signed 13 percent salary increase had already fallen behind an inflation rate that as of April reached almost 23 percent, "and that is even much higher in an area as sensitive as food."

COAD demanded "[t]he requirement to advance to May the increases set in the agreement minutes for June (12%), August (6%) and September (10%) , which together add up to 28%" and called for the reopening of parity talks "against which the university teachers do not have a response from the National Government or an action plan from CONADU."

General strike in Panama over work, education and cost-of-living demands

A general strike began in the city of Colón, Panama on May 9 over the worsening situation for the nation's working class. The mobilization began under the leadership of the Coalition for the Unity of Colón (CUCO) and the Broad Colonese Front (FAC) and was later joined by the National Central of Workers of Panama (CNTP).

The list of demands includes: an end to the 30 percent unemployment rate; measures to fight rising inflation of fuel and food prices; measures to guarantee labor stability; and resources to the province for educational, health, infrastructure and housing needs. One organization, the People's Party, noted that Colón contributes 17 percent of the national gross domestic product (GDP) and receives little public investment, a situation they branded as "inconceivable."

The organizations met May 12 with Panama's President Laurentino Cortizo but were not satisfied with his proposals. Cortizo said that he would meet with "representatives of the private sector, port managers, and the users' association would be invited, with the aim of identifying

employment needs, as well as the development of a database of employment in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce," according to telemetro.com.

There were a number of marches, demonstrations and road blockades in Colón during the week, as well as violent confrontations with police, with injuries and arrests of protesters.

Jamaican water workers strike, demanding timely and improved pay

Workers for Jamaica's National Water Commission (NWC) stopped work in the early morning of May 10 to demand timely payment of overdue wages. While some 2,000 workers, including management personnel, joined the walkout, scores of disgruntled employees joined pickets of the NWC headquarters in Kingston.

In interviews with local reporters, workers complained not only about wages not being delivered on time. They also criticized the NWC for the meager amount they get when they are paid. They lamented that the inflation rate has made life increasingly difficult.

A May 15 editorial in the *Jamaica Observer* deploring the strike noted, "Based on reports in sections of the media, the unions did not know that NWC workers were going to take strike action. Apparently, the unions were made privy to the strike at the back end."

Late on the night of May 11, after 16 hours of talks between the NWC and officials from five unions, an agreement to resume water service was reached and service was returned, though restoration was delayed in some areas.

Mexican phone operators union postpones strike over wages, pensions

The Telephone Operators Union of the Mexican Republic (STRM) postponed its strike that had been planned for May 11 after the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (STPS) intervened. The STPS called a meeting between the STRM and Telmex on May 10 and, despite an agreement not being signed, the union said that it would not call its members out the next day but would wait until June 7 before striking.

The STRM's demands include a 7.5 percent raise in wages and benefits for both active and retired workers, the filling of vacancies that has languished since 2017, an annual review of the collective bargaining agreement and correction of contract violations. Telmex has not budged from its 4 percent raise in wages and 1 percent in benefits, with even smaller increases for retired workers.

Telmex, owned by Carlos Slim, Latin America's richest man, argues that its financial situation will not allow such measures.

Fresno, California bus drivers vote down contract, union appeals for mediation

Bus drivers for the Fresno, California, area transportation system (FAX) voted overwhelming at the beginning of May to reject the city's latest contract offer. Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1027, which represents 270 drivers, however, said the union will not be striking but instead sent a letter to the city declaring an impasse which could lead to mediation and the delay of a settlement by months.

The ATU's contract with FAX expired in the fall of 2020 and negotiations were suspended due to the pandemic. Bargaining then resumed in September of 2021.

The recent contract called for 3 percent annual wage increases, far below inflation, but former union President Rick Steitz told KFSN, "The salary is not the issue."

Two points of contention have emerged. Management is seeking to abolish overtime pay after 8 hours in a single day and instead only grant it after a 40-hour week has been exceeded.

The other issue is how management is utilizing videotaping from a camera system installed in buses 20 years ago. When an incident on a bus occurs, past practice dictated that management would only review video footage 15 minutes before and after the incident. Workers are now concerned that management is violating this and casting a wider net to build a case against drivers.

ATU Local 1027 Secretary Alfredo Molina told the *Fresno Bee*, "If we're second-guessing ourselves, it could mean the difference between disaster or a life-changing maneuver. With the cameras, it's like big brother is always watching." The issue is especially galling after drivers have had to endure the pandemic for over two years.

Hawaii mental health workers prepare for 3-day strike

The union representing mental health providers at Kaiser Permanente's Hilo Clinic on the Island of Hawaii are slated to launch a three-day strike on May 18 as workers demand increased staffing and services along with higher wages. The National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), which represents 58 mental health workers comprising clinical psychologists, licensed clinical social workers and other categories, is negotiating a first-time contract with Kaiser.

The NUHW allowed Kaiser to conclude bargaining with its other unions and only now is conducting the three-day strike isolated from the support of other health care workers. Recently, Kaiser concluded contract negotiations with the NUHW at its health care facilities in Southern California.

Workers are outraged that Kaiser has insufficient mental health care services in Hawaii where the pandemic has increased the need.

Dr. Darah Wallsten, a clinical psychologist, told Hawaii Public Radio that understaffing has greatly impacted patients. "It's really hard to meet with people that maybe have waited two months for an appointment after their initial call. And then they find out that I may not be able to bring them back for another six to eight weeks."

Wisconsin sheet metal workers strike against excessive overtime

Sheet metal workers at Trachte Building Systems hit the picket lines on

May 6 to protest grinding mandatory overtime imposed by management at their facility in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. The 105 members of SMART Local 565 have logged excess overtime that not only places burdens on their families but has come on top of the stresses of the pandemic.

"There was a moment where Trachte worked these guys for seven days a week for about nine weeks in a row very strategically, where they didn't mandate the same person for the 15 days, but they would go back and forth from machines," said Jesse Buell, Local 565 business manager.

Trachte management is seeking additional language to control and expand overtime in the new contract.

Kemps Ice Cream workers ratify contract

Workers at Kemps Ice Cream in Rochester, Minnesota, have ratified a new three-year contract. The 160 workers at the plant, members of the Teamsters, had been set to strike as negotiations reached an impasse. The Teamsters claimed the contract contained the "largest wage increase ever."

Mechanics at Horizon Air ratify new 2-year agreement

Aircraft technicians and field service agents at Horizon Air have ratified a new two-year agreement, with pay increases retroactive to the start of 2022. The workers are members of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA). No further details have been released.

The aircraft technicians are responsible for the maintenance of the carrier's fleet of Embraer 175s and Bombardier Q400s aircraft. The airline serves 45 locations in Western Canada, the Pacific Northwest, California and the US Midwest.

Labor contracts do not expire in the airline industry but become amenable after a term of years. Strikes in the airline industry are subject to arcane and obstructive federal regulations aimed at imposing "labor peace."

Sea to Sky bus strike in British Columbia enters 16th week

Negotiations broke down again last week after only one day in the lengthy strike of bus drivers servicing routes in the Whistler area north of Vancouver. Eighty transit workers, members of Unifor, are striking Pacific Western Transportation routes through Whistler, Squamish and the Pemberton Valley. The strike has shut down all public transportation in the area except for the continuation of special services for people with disabilities.

B.C. Transit, the provincial transit authority, contracts operations out to Pacific Western affiliates Whistler Transit LTD and Diversified Transit in Squamish and partially funds the two private companies.

Workers have been without a contract since August 2021. Their wages, pensions, benefits and job security provisions are far inferior to those in Vancouver and Victoria. In addition, about 40 percent of transit workers on the Sea to Sky route lack benefits coverage. The Whistler area, a longtime playground for the rich, has particularly high home prices, rents and other inflated but necessary consumer items that put further pressure on transit workers' living standards.

Workers at Bombardier in Quebec set to vote on strike

Bombardier workers in Dorval and the Saint Laurent borough of Quebec have voted 99.6 percent in favor of strike. Some 1,800 workers at the aircraft maker Bombardier are set to walk out as talks over a new contract continue to drag on. According to a letter sent to workers by the International Association of Machinists, management refused a “global offer” proposed by the union and in return countered with an unacceptable offer. The union said salaries, outsourcing and indexing to retiree pensions were still in dispute.

The IAM said it had submitted yet another proposal, and if an acceptable counteroffer was not made by management, a strike could take place after May 23.



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