

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

## Strike by Colón, Panama workers over living standards continues

Workers in Panama's Atlantic seaport province of Colón continued the general strike that they began on May 9 with protest actions and clashes with police. The strike and protests were organized by the Coalition for the Unity of Colón (CUCO) together with the Broad Colonese Front and the National Central of Workers of Panama.

The mobilizations, which included pickets and road blockades, in which teachers, bus drivers and others participated, protested the area's high unemployment rate; rising inflation of fuel and food prices; labor stability; and low public investment in educational, health, infrastructure and housing needs. In some cases, riot police reacted with tear gas.

A meeting with President Laurentino Cortizo was scheduled for May 17, but CUCO did not attend. CUCO leader Edgardo Voitier claimed, "The problems belong to Colón, and we are not going to lend ourselves to the same thing that happened in [a previous] meeting at the Abel Bravo school, which included people who had nothing to do with CUCO." He also repeated his request for mediation by a bishop.

Meanwhile, drivers for various public, collegiate and tourism organizations in the western province of Chiriquí voted in a general assembly last week to go on an indefinite strike, though a date to begin was not decided. The drivers, members of the COTRADIN union, disagree with the temporary freezing of fuel prices as insufficient to the inflation crisis. They also want a review of rates every five years.

## Brazilian refinery workers strike against inadequate wage and benefit increases

Some 2,000 workers employed by 13 subcontractors providing services at the Petrobras Paulínia Refinery (Replan) in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, went on indefinite strike last week. The workers walked out in opposition to management's rejection of increases proposed by the Union of Workers in the Construction and Furniture Industries (Sinticom).

The workers want a 15 percent increase in wages, food vouchers, breakfast allowance and the Christmas bonus, but management has refused to budge from the Regional Labor Court's recommendation of 13 percent. As for profit sharing, the court also recommended 13 percent, while Sinticom proposed 18.09 percent.

Other issues that the workers want addressed are improvements in the health plan, inclusion of new job descriptions in the salary table, close monitoring of and compliance with contracts and decent working conditions.

## Mexican teachers strike over wage increase disagreement

Members of the Single Union of Workers of the College of Bachelors of the State of Baja California Sur (SUTCBEBCS) began a strike on May 19 after failing to reach an agreement over a salary increase. Eleven campuses of the College, known as COBACH, in the state were closed.

In contract negotiations, the state government offered a salary increase of 5.4 percent, while SUTCBEBCS put its figure at 10.54 percent. Union Secretary Urbano Atienzo Cota told reporters that the state's offer would be quickly eaten up by inflation and added that COBACH students, of whom there are about 7,400, and their parents support the teachers' demands.

One of those demands is that every agreement be in writing and signed, since "on previous occasions it has not been respected." He added that since 2015, raises have not kept up with inflation, with staff earning less than 20,000 pesos (US\$1,007) and in some cases less than 15,000 pesos (US\$755) per month.

## Jamaican taxi drivers strike to protest fuel prices, poor road conditions, harassment

Taxi drivers in Spanish Town, St. Catherine, Jamaica held protests and withheld their services on May 18 and 19 over increasingly difficult conditions that they are facing. They have been hard hit by the precipitous rise in fuel prices and have called for relief from the government.

Another complaint has been the deplorable condition of the roads. Driving over the potholes, cracks and other conditions has caused damage to their vehicles, necessitating costly replacement parts and repairs. Cabbies also allege that if they try taking alternative routes, police officers from outside Spanish Town cite and fine them for driving "contrary" and even have their vehicles seized and towed.

The Transport Operators Development Sustainable Services called for a meeting with the Ministries of Transport and National Security to discuss the following demands: adjustment of their road licenses to allow drivers to change their routes; improvement of road conditions; relief from the high price of gas; and the end of harassment by "rogue" police.

According to a nationwideradiojm.com report, "The Finance Minister during his Budget presentation in March had announced that 2 billion (Jamaican) dollars [US\$13 million] in gas relief was coming for those adversely affected by the rising fuel prices. Details surrounding that programme have not yet been announced."

## Haitian medical residents strike to protest kidnappings

Medical residents at the General University Hospital of Haiti in Port-au-

Prince went on strike May 21 to demand that authorities take necessary actions to secure the release of a kidnapped colleague. On May 17, 76-year-old Dr. Jacques Pierre, who has practiced medicine for 45 years, was seized by gang members.

In the last two weeks, four hospitals have protested kidnappings with strikes, limits on services and refusal to accept new patients. Kidnapping victims have included a pediatrician, a gynecologist and an orthopedist. "And it's not just doctors. They are grabbing teachers, they are grabbing lawyers, everyone," Dr. Jessie Colimon Adrien, the head of the State University of Haiti Hospital, told the *Miami Herald*.

According to a May 17 United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights report, "Armed violence has reached unimaginable and intolerable levels in Haiti," with 92 deaths, 113 injuries, 12 disappearances and 49 kidnappings from April 24 to May 16. Haiti's Center for Analysis and Research in Human Rights recorded 225 kidnappings for the first quarter of this year, compared to 142 for the similar period in 2021.

### **One-day strike by Argentine tire factory workers**

Mandatory conciliation talks called by Argentina's Ministry of Labor between three tire manufacturers—Bridgestone, Pirelli and Fate—and the Single Union of Tire Workers (SUTNA) expired May 17, with no agreement reached. While another meeting was called for Monday, May 23, the workers went on a one-day walkout on May 20.

SUTNA proposed a 65 percent pay increase for 2021-22 as well as double pay for overtime. While the companies are claiming that the increases would add greatly to production costs, the union claims that the production of one tire is 1,000 pesos (US\$8.45), while the cost for a new set of tires for a car owner ranges from 230,000 to 237,000 pesos (US\$1,944 to US\$2,003).

SUTNA also claims that the factories are in a financial position to improve the proposal since they are favored by restrictions on tire imports and access to the purchase of inputs. "Today, they control the local market, regulating the commercial stock in the sales premises, producing an increase in the price of tires of more than 80 percent in the last year," argued union head Alejandro Crespo.

### **Hotel workers in Rochester, Minnesota, demand increases, back pay**

Some 50 hotel workers rallied May 21 in Rochester, Minnesota, to demand higher wages, paid vacation, sick pay and improved health care. Unite Local 17 represents some 200 workers at a number of hotels in Rochester which service the influx of patients and family members receiving treatment at the renowned hospitals of the Mayo Clinic system.

The ire of the workers focuses on real estate tycoon and health care executive Javon Bea, who purchased four of Rochester's hotels in 2013 for \$230 million, including the flagship facility Kahler Grand Hotel. During contract talks back in 2015, Bea, whose 2019 compensation reached \$9.97 million, declared an impasse and unilaterally imposed a contract that radically reduced workers' living standards.

The National Labor Relations Board ruled against Javon Bea's hotels and ordered the company to issue back pay to possibly as many 200 workers. Six years later, the company has not paid workers a cent.

Scott Timm, a server at the Kahler, told the *Rochester Post-Bulletin*, "They're paying lawyers to help them steal money from people."

Kathy Prouty, a 65-year-old banquet server, calculates she is owed \$75,000 in back pay.

The rally took place while the Minnesota Democratic Farmer Labor Party (DFL) held its state convention, with a number of delegates housed in the Kahler hotels. Minnesota AFL-CIO President Bernie Burnham made perfunctory remarks while DFL State Attorney General Keith Ellison issued a toothless moral appeal, "Management, pay up, be fair, right now."

### **Janitors at downtown Houston office buildings demand \$15 an hour**

Private sector janitors who service the downtown buildings in Houston, Texas, rallied May 18 to demand a \$15 an hour minimum wage as the contract for 2,800 members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) expires May 31. Currently, the average wage for janitors is around \$10.75 an hour, and many work only part-time.

The demand for \$15 an hour by the SEIU goes back more than six years to when janitors made a mere \$9.35 an hour. Now janitors are frustrated, having endured a pandemic and poverty pay.

There is added pressure as the City of Houston signed an executive order to pay \$15 an hour to municipal and airport janitors. The SEIU has calculated that the cost to pay janitors \$15 would add one penny per month to the current \$37.98 a square foot that corporate office renters currently pay.

### **Los Angeles County doctors voting on strike authorization**

Over 1,300 resident physicians are voting May 16 through May 31 to authorize strike action at three of Los Angeles County's largest hospitals. The Committee of Interns, a group affiliated with the Service Employees International Union, revealed that negotiators for LAC+USC Medical Center, Harbor-UCLA Medical Center and Martin Luther King, Jr. Outpatient Center are only offering annual 3.5 percent wage increases at a time when inflation is raging over 8 percent.

Dr. Adam Freeman, a bargaining unit member, told the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, "We are paid a base salary, but the level is fairly low. Depending on what rotation we're working, we can spend 80 hours a week here. When you break that down in hours worked per week, it's less than LA County's minimum wage."

The old agreement expired back in September. The contract vote comes as LA County's 55,000 workers, members of SEIU Local 721, have been presented a totally inadequate contract.

### **Unions extend contracts for Buffalo, New York nurses**

Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 1168 and Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)-United Healthcare Workers East have extended the contract for 8,000 nurses and staff at four Buffalo, New York area Kaleida Healthcare hospitals

and smaller facilities in western New York and northwest Pennsylvania.

The current agreement, negotiated in 2019, was set to expire May 31, but union officials unilaterally extended it to the end of June. In July 2019, nurses were set to strike before union officials announced a last minute deal.

A Kaleida health care worker denounced that deal on Facebook, saying, “I feel that the voice of the workers was definitely NOT heard in this agreement, and am again greatly disappointed in it.” She denounced the union’s threats that a rejection would lead to an even worse contract, saying, “I see that as scare tactics to get us to give up & vote yes... Kaleida is very happy with the agreement. They get their million dollar bonuses & save tons of money... and the workers get scraps.”

Last October, the CWA pushed through a sellout tentative agreement after a 35-day strike at Catholic Health’s Mercy Hospital of Buffalo. Workers fought for improved wages and inadequate staffing but the CWA agreed to a 6.3 percent first year raise--now eclipsed by the current 8.3 percent inflation rate—followed by a miserly 2.75 percent raise in the following three years of the contract. This was combined with worthless promises by Catholic Health to hire more staff.

### Croupiers at Montreal Casino strike

This past Saturday, 521 card dealers at Montreal Casino, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), went on indefinite strike after conducting two four-hour warning walkouts the previous weekend as negotiations for a new contract stalled. The casino workers have been without a collective agreement since March 31, 2020.

The workers are demanding significant improvement in wages, shift scheduling and safety measures. Card dealers, who can distribute up to 10,000 cards per shift, suffer from high rates of repetitive strain injuries. Workers are calling for longer break times and scheduling controls to alleviate the intense floor time pressures.

Loto-Quebec manages the province’s casinos. It is attempting to impose a two-tier system where new hires receive 10 percent less in wages than current workers. In addition, the current miserly wage offer, with threatened rollbacks, would reduce wages to 2017 levels. The casino has so far maintained most gaming operations with managers staffing the tables.



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