

Workers Struggles: The Americas

27 June 2022

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

Latin America

Workers and Students rally for Assange In Mexico City on International Day in Support for Victims of Torture

On June 26, the Life and Liberty for Assange Coalition surrounded the US Embassy building in Mexico City demanding freedom for Julian Assange. The protest marked the International Day in Support for Victims of Torture. At the rally the demonstrators placed pictures of Assange and a blanket on the barriers that surround the US Embassy in Mexico City.

According to the Mexico City daily *La Jornada* a spokesperson for the coalition referred to Assange and other victims of torture: “They are victims of governments that claim to be democratic, but do not respect the basic rights of innocent people.” Other demonstrators denounced the instances of human rights violations against Assange, including reports that Friday before last he had been sent naked into an empty cell.

Sit-down strike at Sidor steel plant in Venezuela

Last week workers at the Sidor (Siderúrgica Orinoco) steel plant in Guyana, Venezuela carried out a sit-down strike. At issue is a promised 186 percent wage increase that was never implemented. Sidor is Venezuela’s largest steel company, with 13,000 workers. The workers involved in the sit-down faced threats of repression and firings throughout the week, by company and government officials. In addition to the Guyana plant, workers also occupied plants in Palanquilla, Alambrón, Pellas and Planchones. The sit-down began on Monday June 21.

On Friday June 26, Sidor’s CEO, Alfredo Maneiro, promised to pay the wage increase and to rehire seven workers who had been fired for protesting in defense of workers’ rights. Management suspected the fired workers of leading the sit-down struggle. Inflation rates were 222 percent in April and 167 percent in May this year.

“We are not fighting against a contractor,” declared one of the workers, “we are fighting against a monster, which is the government. Public firms are in the hands of the government.”

Brazil: FUNAI workers declare protest strike over killing in Amazon jungle

On June 23 workers employed by FUNAI (Fundação Nacional do Índio—National Indian Foundation) launched a one-day national strike to protest the killing of FUNAI employee Bruno Pereira and British journalist Dom Philips in the Amazon jungle. There is widespread suspicion that they died at the hands of a criminal gang involved in illegal fishing, illegal gold mining or the drug trade. Both men were

conducting an exposé of the conditions of indigenous communities across Brazil.

Forty out of the 47 FUNAI offices participated in the strike. The FUNAI workers have mobilized across Brazil demanding a complete investigation of the murders. They also demand that FUNAI president Marcelo Xavier be removed from his post, for declaring that the men did not have government permission to enter the Javari Valley near the Brazil-Peru border. The workers are deeply suspicious of government claims that their colleagues’ deaths had nothing to do with organized crime. Both men were murdered, cremated, and quartered in the Javari Valley. On the 7th, when the bodies had not yet been found, President Jair Bolsonaro (PL) accused the men of being on an “unrecommended adventure.”

United States

Dissatisfaction heating up at giant food distributor US Foods

The Teamsters union has warned that great unrest exists at US Foods distribution facilities throughout the East Coast, and work stoppages are “imminent.” A Teamsters press release stated, “Workers at a growing number of US Foods Distribution Centers throughout the East Coast are considering the possibility of walking off the job following an increasing number of unresolved labor contracts.”

In particular, workers in Salem, Virginia and Allentown, Pennsylvania are poised to strike. Todd Robertson, president of Local 171 in Salem, referring to his 120 drivers, said, “[T]hey’ve had enough.” The workers there joined the Teamsters in June 2021, angry over low wages and the lack of significant benefits.

Pennsylvania and Virginia Teamsters locals employed by US Foods are also preparing to strike. Officials claim at least 22 locations can legally picket, and some recently organized locals are still anticipating their initial contract with their employer.

The Teamsters have filed a number of unfair labor practices allegations with the National Labor Relations Board, accusing the company of firings and unilaterally changing working conditions. The company is considered the third largest broadline food service distributor, with \$24 billion in annual revenue.

Union officials have made militant sounding statements in recent weeks, with International President Sean O’Brien saying, “We aren’t going to be afraid to strike.” But over the last decade the union has only carried out isolated work stoppages over unfair labor practices at locations where the union represents some 4,800 workers, a fraction of the 25,000 employees at 70 locations across the United States.

Arizona heavy equipment operators for Vulcan Materials authorize strike

Heavy equipment mining workers at a Vulcan Materials' operation in Arizona have voted unanimously to authorize strike action after the company moved to ax health care coverage and tear up work rules. The eight workers involved in the contract negotiations are members of Teamsters Local 104.

The company wants to force drivers to work shifts with a mere eight hours off between the time they punch out at the end of the day and punch back in. Vulcan is seeking the unhindered ability to replace workers with subcontractors, temp workers and automated vehicles. The company also wants to eliminate the right of workers to honor picket lines.

The Teamsters represent 700 Vulcan workers across the United States, including workers on strike at the subsidiary US Concrete in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The company is the United States' largest supplier of construction aggregate and employs 7,000 workers at 300 facilities in 20 states. CEO J. Thomas Hill raked in total compensation of \$10.8 million in 2021.

Delta airlines pilots picket to protest short staffing and fatigue

Delta Airline pilots held a picket on Lexington Avenue in New York to protest the short staffing and scheduling chaos that has plagued air travel. The continued spread of COVID has aggravated a labor shortage that has hit the airlines particularly hard.

Pilots carried signs protesting deplorable conditions including "fatiguing schedule" and "poor reliability." One held a sign reading "If I look tired, it is because I am."

Report reveals prisoners in US state and federal facilities receive paltry wages

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) published a report June 15 that reveals imprisoned workers produce \$11 billion worth of goods and services annually, but are only compensated between 13 cents and 52 cents per hour. Out of this compensation, prisoners see more than half their pay deducted to cover the cost of hygiene products and medical care.

Nearly 70 percent of prisoners polled said they are unable to afford basic necessities. Prison workers in the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas receive no compensation for a majority of their work.

Some 76 percent of prisoners said they are required to work under the threat of punishment, including solitary confinement, loss of the right to reduce their sentence and the loss of family visitation.

Work can also be dangerous, but the prison system does not collect consistent data on injuries. Of the 1.2 million prisoners in the United States, two-thirds are employed.

Agreement covering 17,000 Costco workers decisively rejected

Workers at the Costco retail warehouse club rejected a tentative agreement covering 17,000 workers by an overwhelming 93 percent of workers after mail-in ballots were tabulated. The sub-inflation tentative agreement (TA) was to replace the previous contract that expired on January 31 of this year. A strike ratification vote doesn't appear to have been held yet.

The contract was so bad that a faction of the Teamster bureaucracy, Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), called for a "no" vote in order to save face. The proposed contract included derisory wage increases of \$.75, \$.60, and \$.60 over three years. The reformist TDU admitted that the wage increases amounted to only 2.7 percent in the initial year and 2.1 percent in the following years of the tentative three-year agreement. Costco had 288,000 workers in 2020 and raked in \$5 billion in pandemic profits in 2021.

Teamsters shut down strike at Delaware Valley beer

distributors

The Teamsters ended a walkout by workers at three beer distributors in the Philadelphia area, just in advance of the highly profitable July 4th holiday weekend. The two sides reached an agreement on a new, four-year contract, according to a joint statement released Saturday morning by the Delaware Valley Importing Distributors Association and Teamsters Local 830.

While details of the contract have not been released, the Teamsters claimed it contained a significant wage and benefit increase and enhanced "flexibility," a code word for the elimination of work rules to enforce greater exploitation of workers. The union called off the strike just as it threatened to seriously impact the profits of the beer distributors, an indication that the deal is a sellout to management.

Canada

Steelworkers at Stelco's Nanticoke, Ontario mill vote to strike

With their five-year contract set to expire on June 30, over 1,000 members of the United Steelworkers (USW) have given strike authorization in a fight to defend their wages, pensions and benefits. Under conditions where inflation has topped 7.7 percent and shows no sign of abating, Stelco management, which has seen record sales worth over \$2 billion over the past year, has offered a settlement that would represent a significant wage cut over the life of any new contract.

Union officials have applied to the Ontario Labour Relations Board for a conciliator. They have cited recent contract settlements at Bombardier and ArcelorMittal in Quebec as models for their own contract. Such is the double-dealing of the union bureaucrats, that they are hailing these concessionary agreements as major victories. In fact, after a bitter 25-day strike at ArcelorMittal, 800 workers, also organized by the USW, ratified a deal on February 27 that averages only 4.4 percent per year over the life of a six-year contract.

At Bombardier in Montreal, 1,800 workers voted by only 73.4 percent for a new contract after rejecting two previous proposals. Despite the rejection votes the International Association of Machinists refused to call an all-out strike. The deal ratified last week provided for a minimum of 15.5 percent and a maximum of 18.5 percent (depending on inflation) over the course of five years, which comes in as a wage cut in the projected inflationary environment. In addition, the union bowed to management's refusal to offer any cost-of-living adjustments for retirees.



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