

Workers Struggles: The Americas

4 July 2022

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

Protests in Panama over rising prices, government inaction and corruption

Various sectors of Panamanian workers carried out protests last week over rising prices, government inaction and corruption. The mobilizations have included marches, blockades and work stoppages.

Members of a group called the United People for Life Alliance, which includes unions, labor confederations, and peasant and indigenous organizations, marched to President Laurentino Cortizo's headquarters and protested in Panama City, the capital, on June 29. Cortizo's administration has been roundly denounced for its corruption, pro-business policies and incompetence in dealing with the pandemic and the worsening standard of living for the working class.

On June 30, freight carriers and dump trucks blocked several roads leading to Panama City, blocking traffic to the airport. In Tierras Altas, in the west coast province of Chiriquí, where 80 percent of the capital's food is grown, produce trucks parked and remained unloaded while drivers demanded a meeting with Agricultural Ministry officials to push for the freeing of fuel prices.

The Alliance called a nationwide protest July 1 to coincide with Cortizo's report to the National Assembly on his administration's management of the nation. Leaders of various trade unions will hold a national meeting on July 6 to evaluate a response to the report.

Argentina hit by strikes and protests by truckers, television workers, tenants

Truck drivers in Argentina struck last week to demand an easing of the rising price of gasoline and diesel. In addition to the soaring prices, drivers have encountered shortages of diesel and other fuels. Since Argentina's domestic fuel production is insufficient to meet demand, it is largely dependent on imports, which have been drastically reduced due to the US/NATO proxy war in Ukraine.

The strikes and protests have negatively affected grain exports as well as the provision of fertilizers to farms. Traffic to and from ports was "normalized" somewhat after the government of Alberto Fernández promised to increase imports and development of domestic gas and oil, but within the current chaotic situation, there is little likelihood that the tenuous truce will hold for long.

Workers at news channel América 24 (A24) voted to go on strike from July 1 to 4. As urgente24.com reported, "Journalists, drivers, panelists, cameramen, producers and other staff, both permanent and contracted, completely paralyzed the signals."

Two unions, the Argentine Television Union and the Buenos Aires Press Union called the joint strike after complaints about company practices, including delayed and unpaid wages and bonuses, mistreatment of workers and the use of contract workers under the guise of being "independent" or "outside the agreement." The last straw was an email to employees saying that "due to financial constraints, we will not be able to make the full payment of the Christmas bonus, which will be paid in installments."

Limited programming continued with a skeleton staff of "independent," i.e., contract, workers and management.

Also last week, members of an organization called the Association of Grouped Tenants protested in front of the National Congress June 29 against changes to Argentina's rent law. A statement by the group denounced "the real estate market and the attempt to vote the opinion of Together for Change (JxC), the Federal Interblock and the United Provinces, which proposes returning to two-year contracts, quarterly or semi-annual increases without any index or limit and possibility that the owners or real estate agents require us to pay rent in advance."

Gervasio Muñoz, president of the National Tenants Federation, called the JxC proposal "a huge regression in terms of rights" and accused owners of "setting profoundly elitist conditions." He added that "here we must stop thinking about renting housing as a market issue; access to housing is a right and there has to be a State there." He called for annual updates and stated that "if the owners do not want to rent, they must carry out a tax on empty housing so that they have to put them up for rent."

Bahamian nurses union receives strike certificate, but "has no plan to strike"

The Bahamas Nurses Union (BNU), whose members voted overwhelmingly to strike on June 9, received a strike certificate on June 29. As the WSWWS reported June 13, "The nurses have longstanding grievances, including the government's foot-dragging on agreement of a new contract, short-staffing, poor working conditions, inadequate protections from the pandemic, the need for a pay raise and the lack of a system of promotions."

The nurses are ready to strike. However, BNU president Amancha Williams, on confirming the ruling, told reporters, "At this present time, the nurses union has no plans to strike. We are in negotiation right now with PHA and the Department of Health. We wait to hear from them, we haven't heard from them as yet."

Wilson claimed that "if we see that it's not going in the [direction] that we want it to go we will utilize our strike certificate, but we will do that on our terms—on nobody else's terms but the Bahamas Nurses Union and its members." In the meantime, the strike will be put on the back burner.

Health and Wellness Minister Dr. Michael Darville said that a negotiating team "has been given the mandate to ensure that many of these longstanding issues are sorted so that our nurses can be in a proper environment and some of the issues as it relates to promotions are being

addressed.” He did not mention any deadline for a settlement.

Trinidad and Tobago: Water and Sewerage employees protest over rumors of planned retrenchments

Workers for Trinidad and Tobago’s Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) picketed the agency’s headquarters in Saint Joseph on June 30 during lunchtime in response to retrenchment rumors. The workers are members of the Public Services Association, which alleges that 600 workers would be cut in line with a restructuring plan currently under discussion.

PSA accuses WASA and Minister of Public Utilities Marvin Gonzales of ignoring them and has demanded a definite response to the rumors. When asked about the protest, according to tt.loopnews.com, “Gonzales seemed unaware and flippant.” He scolded the workers for protesting and answered a question about plans to fire staff as part of the restructuring scheme thus: “As Minister of Public Utilities, I don’t know nothing about that.”

On the eve of July 4 holiday, unions announce agreement for Atlantic City casino workers

In time to ensure that casinos stay open for the July 4 holiday, the busiest time of year, Unite Here Local 54 announced a settlement with four major casinos, blocking a possible strike.

Settlements were announced with MGM Resorts International, and three Caesars Entertainment casinos: Caesars, Harrah’s and the Tropicana. On Saturday, Unite Here announced a settlement with Hard Rock casino, ending any strike threat. Talks continued at two smaller casinos, but a settlement appeared likely.

Unite Here claimed significant wage increases but has refused to release any contract details. The last strike in Atlantic City was in 2016 against the Trump Taj Mahal casino. The casino then shut down and was sold to Hard Rock.

Unions agree to further one month extension in contract for 6,300 workers at Kaleida Health in Western New York

Two unions, the Communications Workers of America Local 1168 and 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East, have been in talks over contracts since March covering 6,300 workers at Kaleida Health, the largest health care network in Western New York state.

Most non-economic items have reportedly been decided. However, in a joint statement, CWA and 1199SEIU said the extension gives them “more time to present our economic proposals and to continue negotiations on the issues critical to reaching a solid agreement on behalf of our members.” Staffing remains a major outstanding issue.

So far, no strike vote has been taken or a deadline set. In July 2019, when the last contract expired, workers were set to strike when the unions rammed a sellout agreement that evoked significant opposition.

The current agreement covers registered nurses, nurse practitioners, dietary workers, personal care attendants and numerous others at several Kaleida facilities, including Buffalo General Medical Center, Oishei

Children’s Hospital, Millard Fillmore Suburban Hospital, HighPointe on Michigan, DeGraff Medical Park and various clinics.

Quarry strikes, shortages of construction aggregate, threaten to halt construction and road projects

The month-old strike by 300 heavy equipment operators at quarries across northern Illinois is threatening to shut down Chicago-area road and construction projects. The strikers produce sand, gravel and crushed rock that is critical for the production of asphalt and concrete.

Talks between the International Association of Operating Engineers and three companies represented by the Chicago Area Aggregate Producers Association are deadlocked. Illinois Department of Transportation secretary Omer Osman contacted Lehigh Hanson, Vulcan Materials and Holcim—the three companies involved in the strike—to urgently encourage a settlement, stating, “the work stoppage could not occur at a worse time.”

The Illinois Department of Transportation said road construction workers are working through stockpiles and roadwork is now being affected. Some projects are maintaining operations by bringing in materials from Indiana and Wisconsin.

San Diego auto mechanics strike over take-backs

Some three dozen auto technicians struck Mercedes-Benz of San Diego dealership in the Kearny Mesa area June 17 in an unfair labor practices strike. Pedro Gomez, a shop steward for the International Association of Machinists Local Lodge 1484, told the San Diego Union-Tribune, “They’re enforcing rules that were never rules before,” charging the action was “to try and intimidate us so that we would take a lesser deal.”

The Penske Automotive Group, which operates 146 automotive dealerships across the United States, is offering base pay increases for master technicians of 15.1 percent and 10 percent for certified technicians followed by annual increases. But workers are opposed to Penske’s demand to wipe out a weekly guarantee that provides for a minimum when automotive repairs slow down.

The old agreement expired back in April. The company is currently advertising for strikebreakers to cross picket lines. A new round of negotiations is set to begin July 13.

Rhode Island delivery drivers on strike over wages and benefits

About 60 delivery drivers have been on strike since June 22 at DHL’s operations in Pawtucket, Rhode Island over wages that will keep up with the cost of living, safety issues, health care and retirement benefits. Jerry Porter, a driver and member of Teamsters Local 251 said, “We are overworked and underpaid... Our health care is too high, and our wages are too low.”

Northeast Transportation Services hires and manages DHL’s delivery operations in Pawtucket. Negotiations began in March and, starting in May, a federal mediator stepped in. The company is hiring strikebreakers.

Ontario long-term care workers appeal contract arbitration

One thousand two hundred workers, members of Unifor, at 11 long-term care facilities across the province are appealing a contract imposed on them by a government appointed labor arbitrator. The arbitrator released his ruling on May 31. The contract followed the guidelines provided in the wage restraint legislation of the province's Conservative government of Premier Doug Ford.

With inflation running at 7.7 percent with no sign of abating, the arbitrator awarded only 1.5 percent in the first year and 1.75 percent in the second year of the settlement with a miniscule increase in a few benefits. The workers are prohibited from striking by provincial labor edicts. The ruling follows years of wage restraint contracts that have reduced the workers to near poverty living conditions and contributed to a steady exodus of workers from the industry.

The request for a judicial review of the arbitrator's decision comes the same week that long-term residential care workers in Nova Scotia prepare for a strike vote. After failed negotiations with the government and an appointed conciliator, the workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, now await the filing of the conciliator's report to the Ministry of Labour. The contract offer tabled by the employer was a three-year deal with only a 1.5 percent increase in each year with a miserable 10 cent per hour increase to shift and weekend premiums.



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