

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Strikes and protests to continue in Panama over economic crisis

Activists from several unions and other organization, including teachers, plan to continue strikes and protests over inflation, high fuel prices and the quality of social services. There have been an increasing number of protests by teachers and workers from other sectors in the last few weeks, with the Association of Teachers (Asoprof) calling a three-day national strike beginning July 6. The strike was joined by workers in delivery, construction, health care, fishing and other sectors. Student, parent, peasant and indigenous organizations also heeded the strike call.

The unions have held negotiations with the government, but to no avail. The latest round with the Education Ministry ended with no agreement. Asoprof has issued a list of 32 demands, including the reduction and/or freezing of fuel and food prices; supplies of medicine and medical equipment; the end of police repression; and secure retirement. One particularly essential demand is compliance with article 349 of the Organic Law of Education, which requires that the Government guarantee the quality of education for all.

By July 7, with the government of Laurentino Cortizo offering no concrete proposals, the organizers declared that the strike would continue indefinitely. At least 45 locations in the nation have experienced roadblocks on major highways. At a mobilization in the capital Panama City, National Police officers used tear gas on demonstrators, who threw stones at them.

Bolivian doctors call strike over arrest of colleague

Doctors in the Union of Medical Branches of Public Health (Sirmes) of La Paz, Bolivia protested the arrest of the president of the Bolivian Medical Association, Luis Larrea, and issued a call July 8 for an indefinite national strike to begin July 11. Larrea, who is also the president of the National Health Council (Conasa), was accused of homicide.

Larrea's stepbrother alleges that the doctor could have saved the life of his father, who had contracted COVID-19, but he did not vaccinate him in time. His father died in June 2021. After complying with a call to testify at a hearing on July 8, Larrea was incarcerated. It was not until May of this year that the accusation was filed.

Sirmes has been in fruitless negotiations with the government and

recently broke off dialogue over the government's refusal to comply with a set of demands. The union accused the Public Ministry of having political motives behind the arrest and expressed fear that more arrests could follow. A Sirmes statement said, "Today it is him, tomorrow it could be any of us who fight for a better health system."

Four-hour strike in Uruguay for pay boost and other demands

The Inter-Union Workers Plenary-National Workers Convention (PIT-CNT) of Uruguay called a four-hour strike for July 7. In the capital city of Montevideo, workers marched from the Plaza Independencia to the Legislative Palace, where speakers denounced the neoliberal policies of the government of Luis Lacalle Pou.

Some workers outside of the PIT-CNT, like bank employees and members of the Single Union of Automobiles with Taximeters and Telephone Operators, as well as popular organizations, joined the strike and march, while others did not. Members of popular kitchens, cooperatives, student and feminist organizations joined the limited walkout.

However, workers in the public education, health services and public officials did not join the strike. The National Union of Workers and Transport Workers, which is affiliated with the PIT-CNT, kept running with the agreement of the federation.

Demands put forward at the gathering included the end of hunger and famine; decent and quality work; better wages; comprehensive social security; annulment of the increase in the retirement age; defense of collective bargaining; and an end to privatization and underfunding of public companies and strengthening of the social services sector.

Trinidadian cement workers protest pay delays, cuts to medical plan, violations of contract

Protests by workers for Trinidad Cement Limited (TCL) have erupted several times over delays in the payment of wages and pension contributions. On July 4, workers gathered in front of the company's Claxton Bay plant and headquarters to demand the payments and respect for the collective bargaining process.

The workers protested again on July 7, demanding that TCL stop its meddling with the medical and pension plans and that it meet with Oilfield Workers Trade Union representatives, a demand that they have been making since March.

Teamsters union appeals to private equity sharks in Indiana FireKing strike

The Teamsters union staged protests outside the Boston and San Francisco offices of the private equity firm Champlain Capital July 8. The company is invested in the Albany, Indiana manufacturing facility owned by FireKing, where 86 members of Teamsters Local 89 have been on strike for two months. Teamsters general president Sean O'Brien sought to portray the impotent protest, along with a letter to Champlain, as representing "solidarity... by taking to the streets."

Meanwhile, FireKing has refused to alter its health insurance plan that, according to the Teamsters, "could leave families with up to \$13,000 in out-of-pocket costs per year." With the commencement of the strike back on May 9, FireKing immediately cut off health care coverage and hired strikebreakers to replace workers. The company has made clear it will not rehire strikers.

OhioHealth axes over 600 jobs in outsourcing move

OhioHealth announced July 7 that it will slash over 600 employees in the next three to five months, in the largest layoffs in the corporation's history. The cuts will affect its IT sector and the revenue cycle department that deals with insurance claims and patient billing.

IT will suffer 567 job cuts, leaving a mere 128 workers left in that department. Another 70 workers out of 1,400 revenue cycle workers will see their jobs gone by November and as the company AGS Health LLC steps in to take over.

IT jobs will be outsourced to Accenture. Colin Yoder, OhioHealth Director of Media and Public Relations, tried to obscure the company's goal, stating, "This is not a cost savings move." But the Columbus Dispatch indicated that the layoffs "position the health care system for a future where patients rely more on telemedicine..."

With the arrival of the pandemic, many health care companies were compelled to accelerate telemedicine, where doctors and nurses assist patients remotely. The move comes at a time when nurses nationwide are angry over unsafe staffing levels and are pressing for stricter nurse-to-patient ratios.

OhioHealth is one of Ohio's largest employers, with 30,000 workers, 12 hospitals and 200 outpatient locations.

Unions bow to bankruptcy court in preparing sale of Pennsylvania company

The International Association of Machinists and the United Steelworkers reached a settlement last week that will allow the bankruptcy sale of Pennsylvania-based Armstrong Flooring to proceed.

The union agreements will cut off retiree benefits owed to the spouses and dependents of deceased workers on July 31, 2022. The Steelworkers did not resolve claims for 401(k) contributions owed to 33 of its members who are owed \$3,500 each. Health care and other

benefits will be ended following workers' final day on the job.

Armstrong Flooring was spun off from its parent company in 2016. It has operations in Pennsylvania, Mississippi, Illinois, California and Oklahoma, as well as China and Australia. It filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2022.

The settlement with the union clears the way for the sale of the company. It is rumored that another company that competes with Armstrong, AHF, is maneuvering to buy Armstrong's assets.

Union officials offer to end Quebec dairy strike without a new contract

Officials of the Centrale des syndicats démocratiques (CSD) made an offer to management last week to end the strike of 250 workers at the Agropur cheese factory in Granby, Quebec. The workers, who have been without a contract for almost a year, struck the dairy plant on June 29, demanding a new deal that addresses concerns over wages, benefits and working conditions.

Particularly egregious is Agropur's demand that a steady shift system in operation for decades be altered so that shift lengths can be increased from 8 to 12 hours. In addition, shift times would be irregular, requiring workers to go to their jobs at different times over the course of the work week. With negotiations at a standstill, CSD representatives sent a proposal to management promising to return to work and continue bargaining if Agropur withdrew its shift change proposals. Agropur has yet to respond.

The strike has drawn national attention after news reports showed dairy farmers dumping tankers full of milk for lack of access to a dairy processor. It has been estimated that two million liters of milk have been dumped since the strike began. Not mentioned in the televised coverage was the fact that anywhere from 100 million to 300 million liters of milk are dumped in Canada each year. Dairy farmers in Canada, under a supply management protocol, receive compensation for milk that does not reach its markets.



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