

Mexican Telmex workers strike, Anti government protests sweep Surinam

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Latin America

Workers for Teléfonos de México (Telmex) struck on July 21 over a number of issues, including noncompliance with the collective contract, wages and benefits. The Telmex workers belong to the Telephone Workers Syndicate of the Mexican Republic (STRM), which represents over 60,000 active and retired telephone employees.

Telmex, part of multibillionaire Carlos Slim's América Móvil corporation, is one of the nation's largest telecommunications companies. The strike was the first since its total privatization in 1991. STRM accused Telmex of "lack of agreement and political will" and coercive measures such as withholding of salaries and benefits as well as physical and verbal aggressions.

The walkout, however, was short-lived. On July 22, with the intervention of the federal Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, STRM and Telmex reached an agreement to suspend the strike. A "Technical Table" has been established that will supposedly respond to the workers' demands, under the Secretary of Labor's mediation.

The next 20 business days will be open for "viable" proposals to resolve issues of salaries—a recent 4.5 percent increase is nowhere near sufficient in view of inflation—contract violations, subcontracting, labor rights, over 1,900 job vacancies and pensions. As for the last demand, the company has been steering new hires into a private investment scheme instead of the usual pension plan.

Thousands of Surinamese joined demonstrations against the government of President Chandrikapersad Santokhi last week. On July 19, protesters gathered outside the Office of the President in the capital Paramaribo and tried to enter the premises, but were prevented by security personnel. Another crowd assembled at Independence Square, also in the capital, to demand changes, including calls for Santokhi to step down.

The following day saw more protests, with protesters denouncing rising prices and corruption among high-profile

figures, particularly Santokhi's wife, Melissa, and Leo Brunswijk, the brother of Vice President Ronnie Brunswijk. Santokhi, saying that he was elected to serve for five years—his administration is two years into its term—and refuses to consider stepping down.

The crisis compelled Sankothi to cancel a planned trip to Paraguay to attend a summit of some South American leaders. He has postured as being reasonable and called for "dialogue" with the mostly youthful protesters, who regard such a proposal with suspicion.

One group called Team Organic, which claims to be apolitical and shuns both established political parties and labor unions, stated: "We have no desire to enter into a conclave with you privately or in a small context. In retrospect, we do not want to be accused of colluding with the government for our own personal gain. A national dialogue, on the other hand, in which all media houses and relevant experts will be present, sounds better."

A Plenary of General Secretaries of the State Workers Association (ATE) in Río Negro province, Argentina voted July 22 to reject the government's wage rise offer and call strike action for July 25 and 26. Both the rejection of the offer and the strike vote were unanimous.

The provincial government proposed a raise of 2,500 pesos (US\$19.27) in July, another of 4,500 pesos (US\$34.69) in August and a remunerative bonus of 7 percent in September, an offer that ATE called "unacceptable." ATE general secretary Rodrigo Vicente told reporters that the government offers "do not fulfill the purpose that they should have in times of crisis, which is to substantially improve lower incomes. Instead, they are intended to be used in a way that harms those above as well as those below. ... They are not fulfilling the commitment that wages beat inflation."

ATE demands guarantees that no Río Negro state worker falls below the poverty line, and that salaries be consistent across secretariats and ministries. In addition, it calls for payments for clothing, the scuttling of precarious contracts, movement toward permanent positions, honoring of collective agreements, and decent pensions among other demands.

Leaders of Panamanian unions who have called strikes and protests over the rising cost of living, corruption and the government's ineffective COVID policies met July 19 to formulate demands that they will present at another meeting with the government. Previous talks have failed. This time around, representatives of the Catholic Church will act as mediators.

Labor unions as well as peasant and indigenous organizations have carried out strikes, protests, blockades and other actions since late June, often in the face of police repression. In the same week as the July 19 meeting, police fired tear gas at protesting educators who blocked a section of highway in the province of Veraguas.

“Images that circulated on television showed clouds of smoke, clashes and scuffles between police and protesters. At the moment there was no information on a number of affected and detained,” noted a *Voice of America* report.

More than 200 workers from the Bahamas Airport Authority called in sick on July 18 to protest unpaid wages and lack of progress on an industrial agreement. Despite a judge quickly ruling the sickout illegal and ordering them back to work, the industrial action continued into the next day, with about 80 percent not returning to their posts at the New Providence.

However, the workers were all back by the next day as the Bahamas Public Service Union and the government restarted negotiations. Acting Prime Minister Chester Cooper told reporters, “We hope to settle most of the issues by the end of August and we hope to continue the conversations.”

United States

Some 600 pharmacists for the grocery chains Ralphs, Vons and Albertsons in Southern California voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike July 22. The pharmacists are spread across seven locals of the United Food and Commercial Workers and complain of under-staffing, heavy workloads and a wage offer that will not keep step with inflation.

The grocery chains are offering a mere \$1.05 an hour wage hike in the first year and a 90 cent increase in the second and third years. Workers are calling for annual increases of \$5, \$4 and \$3 an hour.

The bargaining unit represents the largest contingent of pharmacists in the United States. Nevertheless, the UFCW segregates these workers from the rest of the grocery workers, diminishing their strength. The UFCW has filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board over a number of issues, anticipating that the labor bureaucracy, if it calls a strike, will limit it to a small number of days in an attempt to release the anger of workers.

Alaska AT&T workers voted overwhelmingly July 13 to authorize strike action after nearly five months of bargaining. Corporate management is demanding workers pay as much as \$1,100 a month for family health insurance while only offering annual pay increases as low as 0.5 percent and 1.1 percent over the next two years.

This contrasts with a \$3.8 million boost to AT&T CEO John Stankey’s salary, raising it to \$24.8 million in 2021. In June, anger led to a brief walkout by AT&T workers over contract negotiations.

Tim Kavanagh, a network technician and one of the 175 members of Teamsters Local 959 involved in the contract struggle,

told Alaska Public Media a strike is likely. “He’s [Stankey] going to justify that handsome sum by taking it off the dinner table of labor workers. That’s insulting.”

During a 2019 earnings conference call, AT&T executives revealed a plan to cut labor costs by 4 percent over the next three years.

About one dozen scale technicians, members of the International Association of Machinists, are continuing a strike at the Tyson Fresh Meats plant outside Holcomb, Kansas.

The workers walked out July 11 after rejecting the company’s offer. The workers tend to scales at the facility, but also work on most of the automation at the plant, including cranes, printers and metal detectors.

There are 3,000 workers at the plant, but the scale technicians are the only unionized workers. The workers complain that they receive fewer benefits than nonunion workers, including having no COVID safety protection measures, ergonomic programs, plant-wide seniority, sick pay or special vacation pay.

Canada

With contract negotiations at a standstill, more than 200 municipal workers in Mount Pearl near St. John’s, Newfoundland are now entering their third week on strike. Members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the strikers work in recreation services, administration, taxation and finance, road maintenance, water and sewage, refuse collection and recycling, facilities maintenance, landscape maintenance, engineering and city planning. Mount Pearl is the second largest city in the province with about 23,000 inhabitants.

The city has already been forced to postpone, curtail and sometimes cancel scheduled garbage pickup days and has completely suspended recycling programs. Also making an impact has been the closure of recreational services for the local population just as the school holidays have begun. The work stoppage is the first for the CUPE workers since the municipality locked out the city workforce in a 2014 contract dispute.

The workers are demanding that the city withdraw its attempt to impose a two-tier benefits system on all future new hires in the bargaining unit. They also cite the significant spike in inflation—with predictions that prices will remain high for at least another year or more—and are demanding a significant pay increase to counter the erosion of their wages.



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