

Explosion of strikes in Argentina; Panama teachers begin indefinite walkout

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 across Argentina mobilized last week demanding an end to the hunger wages, job cuts, and oppressive working conditions that are being forced on them by the austerity measures of the Peronist administration of Alberto Fernandez and the International Monetary Fund under conditions where the annual rate of inflation exceeds 80 percent.

The major sectors on strike last week include dockworkers, who held protests in the port of Buenos Aires (July 21) against the layoff of 800 workers in Terminal 5; nurses in Buenos Aires hospitals that had been hired because of the pandemic protested against layoffs (July 22); Buenos Aires educators (July 22) protested the layoff of 22,000 teachers employed by the pandemic-related TRA supplemental education program. In addition, there was a 48-hour strike by education workers in the Patagonian Rio Negro and Chubut provinces over wages (July 25 and 26) and protests by health workers in the industrial city of Cordoba, protesting months of unpaid wages (July 25).

The above is a small sample of the many struggles taking place that threaten to coalesce into a general strike. Most of these protests and protest strikes are being held in defiance of the Peronist CGT unions that conspire to isolate them and limit them to a day or two.

On July 22, the Panama Teachers Association declared a strike of indefinite duration, pending the results of wage negotiations with the government of president Laurentino Cortizo. The teachers association has signed on to a list of eight demands, in alliance with peasant and community groups, linked to the high cost of living. Real wages for teachers and other workers in Panama have fallen 30 percent in the last five years. In addition to the pay hike, the group is demanding price controls on necessities, food, and fuel, and increases in the public education budget.

Professors, students and employees of the University of the Republic (UDELAR) rallied on July 23 to show their opposition to university budget cuts announced by the Luis Calle Pou administration at the beginning of July.

UDELAR is the most prestigious, and largest, university in Uruguay. It is also a major research institution.

The budget cuts would reduce teaching hours and increase student tuition and fees, which already had gone up over the last two years.

Public school teachers in the state of Lara marched on July 29, demanding a summer bonus that compensates for the high rates of inflation in Venezuela. Chanting, “We are teachers, not delinquents!” the teachers surrounded the National Budget Office (ONOPRE) headquarters in Barquisimetro (Lara’s capital city), despite being attacked by the state police.

Educators also mobilized in Caracas, the nation’s capital, demanding the closure of ONOPRE, because of its role of unilaterally imposing wage and benefit cuts. The teachers are also demanding wage increases that keep up with living costs. While there are no official statistics, since 2014 the cost of the basic food-basket is estimated to have increased 61 percent, from US\$282 to US\$455, between February 2021 and February 2022. Due to recent bouts of hyperinflation, prices are generally quoted in US dollars for many goods and services. By some estimates it takes an income equivalent to 300 minimum wages to exist over the poverty line in Venezuela.

United States

Negotiators for Bridgestone Corporation and the United Steelworkers reached a tentative agreement 36 minutes after the contract covering 3,000 workers at six tire plants in five states expired July 28. Workers were demanding higher wages, equivalent health insurance for all members, scheduling improvements, no concessions on seniority rights and the demand that the company reverse a previous reduction of retiree health benefits.

These demands are being advanced under conditions of soaring inflation and Bridgestone's recent first-quarter profit earnings of \$634 million along with anticipated profits of more than \$3 billion for 2022, nearly 8 percent more than 2021.

Local 310 Vice-President Bill Campbell at the Des Moines, Iowa Firestone plant, owned by the Japanese-based Bridgestone Group, said the 950 workers there were "fully prepared and ready" for a strike. The Des Moines tire facility produces agricultural, construction, forestry and off-road tires that constitute 90 percent of Firestone's products in the Canadian and US market. A notice on Local 310's website stated, "There will be informational meetings scheduled in the next few weeks, followed by a vote whether to accept the agreement or not."

The Bridgestone plant in La Vergne, Tennessee, employs 1,100 workers and manufacturers radial tires for trucks and buses. The other plants are located in Akron, Ohio; Bloomington, Illinois; Russellville, Arkansas; and Warren County, Tennessee. The contract struggle in the United States comes on the heels of a strike by Bridgestone workers in Argentina.

UPS workers in Brooklyn, New York, rallied July 27 to demand the company address unsafe working conditions for warehouse workers and drivers during the current heat wave. Speakers called UPS distribution centers "infernos" and held a moment of silence for 24-year-old Esteban Chavez, a UPS driver who died on the job in Pasadena, California while working in 90-degree heat.

Teamsters Local 804 President Vincent Perrone, whose local represents 8,000 members, reported four drivers were taken to emergency rooms in the past week due to the heat. In one case, management failed to call an ambulance.

Another Teamsters official reported that UPS shuts off air-conditioning in warehouses at 6:00 PM and challenged UPS CEO Carol Tome to work an evening shift in a warehouse.

The militant speeches by Local 804 officials come as UPS workers have been roiled by grueling working conditions, inflation and the pandemic and the expiration of the UPS national master agreement is one year away on July 31, 2023. However, Perrone proposed no concrete action to defend working conditions, deferring the demand for air conditioning and other safety measures until 2023.

Shouting "no contract, no peace," 300 workers at the Tenderloin Housing Clinic in San Francisco walked out on strike and rallied in front of the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Services July 27 calling for increased wages. Andria Blackmon, a caseworker, told missionlocal.org she wanted the restoration of the \$5 per hour COVID-19 hazard pay workers received during the period July 2020 to March 2021.

"We're really struggling," said Blackmon. "You know, we're borrowing money from each other, we're giving each other rides. We just seem to always end up short."

The Tenderloin Housing Clinic services some 2,000 affordable housing units in San Francisco, mainly providing for the homeless. The workers, represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), are comprised of desk clerks, janitors, case workers and others.

A Tenderloin case manager currently makes about \$20 an hour, a barely sustainable wage in the high-cost San Francisco market which is further aggravated by inflation. Other case workers in the city make over \$25 an hour.

Back in May, the members of SEIU Local 1021 voted by 99 percent to strike. At the start of negotiations, management representatives attempted to insert language in the contract that made "insubordination" cause for immediate termination. Subsequently, that demand was withdrawn.

Canada

Workers at the Pickering Casino Resort and Casino Ajax outside Metro Toronto are continuing a strike that began July 23 following the expiration of their contract in face of picket line violence. Over the weekend, workers reported that a picket was hit by a car outside the Woodbine Casino. The worker suffered a contusion to his hand requiring multiple stitches.

Tentative agreements were made Friday night at six other casinos in Ontario, including Great Blue Heron Casino near Port Perry. Those locations continued operations without interruption. Unifor Local 1090 represents approximately 1,500 gaming workers at six Great Canadian Gaming Commission properties.

Meanwhile, strikers from the Pickering Casino Resort set up a secondary picket line at Casino Woodbine Friday, erecting pylons and waving flags outside. All entrances were picketed, leading to long delays getting inside.

Workers have been demanding pay increases and the creation of more fulltime positions. The walkout was apparently sparked by the refusal of the management of the two struck casinos to meet the management offers at other GCCC operations. "Great Canadian Gaming can easily afford to pay workers at Pickering what they pay workers at Woodbine," said Corey Dalton, president of Unifor Local 1090. "Until that gap is reduced, it will not be business as usual for GCGC."

There was no information available about details of what Unifor had accepted at the other casinos.



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