

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

Teachers across Argentina began a national two-day strike on August 10 “to reject and repudiate the prosecution and criminalization of the protest,” according to the CTERA teachers’ confederation, which issued the strike call. The statement refers specifically to the recent conviction for arson of Santiago Goodman, the former head of the Chubut Education Workers Association (Atech) and former union secretary of the Argentine Workers Central Union.

During Atech protests over unpaid wages in the southern province of Chubut in September 2019, teachers Jorgelina Ruiz Díaz and María Cristina Aguilar perished in an auto accident as they were returning from a protest in the provincial capital Rawson, exacerbating already heightened tensions. Goodman and two other teachers were accused of setting a fire in the state legislature building. The two others were cleared of the charges, but Goodman was pronounced guilty and faces a sentence of from three to 10 years in prison, to be issued by the judge on August 18.

Ctera demanded Goodman’s acquittal and accused the government of “armed and illegal espionage.” It also denounced a wave of raids on the homes of at least 25 leaders of social protest movements that took place in March and April, mostly in Jujuy province.

Hundreds of workers, students and members of indigenous and social organizations marched from Guatemala City’s University of San Carlos (USAC) to the historic Plaza de la Constitución near the political center of the country on August 10. At various times, protesters gathered in front of the Supreme Court, the Congress and the Presidential House.

The protesters demonstrated for a thorough investigation of corruption charges against President Alejandro Giammattei and denounced the inaction of Attorney General Consuelo Porras, a friend of the president. They also demanded the end of gross inequality and the rising cost of living, as well as an end to the suppression of free expression.

The student contingent under the General Coordinator of Students repeated its nonrecognition of the election of USAC rector Walter Mazariegos, which they called “a fraud,” and demanded democratic elections for rector. An indigenous representative said that all branches of the government “are hanging us, our brothers, our peoples are the ones who are suffering all this high cost of living.”

Thousands of public sector workers marched in Port of Spain August 12 against the government’s pathetic wage raise offer. Members of unions representing nurses, communication workers, firefighters, oilfield workers, waterfront workers, public services and other departments participated in the protest.

Prime Minister Keith Rowley had claimed that the government could not afford significant raises. After extended negotiations, the chief personnel officer upped the government’s 2 percent offer to 4 percent, a

figure that angered workers who not only have been buffeted by inflation but have suffered retrenchments.

Retirees also complain that their payment adjustments do not begin to reflect their needs. To add insult to injury, the government has also been raising and introducing new taxes.

The march concluded in front of the Finance Ministry, where union bureaucrats fulminated against the government and said that they would step up their actions in the coming days without specifying what those would be.

A few hundred workers in education and health care marched through western Caracas August 11 to demand an end to delays in payment of bonuses and a wage raise. The protesters attempted to enter the Ombudsman’s Office, but were prevented by police. However, a group of protesters delivered a list of their demands. Protests took place in most of the nation’s 23 states.

The protesters claim that the government has delivered on only 25 percent of a vacation bonus agreed on in the last contract. The government has not said when they will receive the remaining 75 percent. The Venezuelan Federation of Teachers has said that if the Maduro administration “does not fulfill its labor obligations with the teaching profession,” public schools will not start classes in September.

Inflation has eroded what little spending power teachers had. Around half of Venezuela’s teachers have left the profession since 2017, according to an Infobae report.

Thousands of informal, unemployed and precarious (i.e., temporary contract) workers in Buenos Aires, Argentina concentrated in various locations in the city on August 10. They then marched to the Government House in the Plaza de Mayo to demand a meeting with the Economy Minister, Sergio Massa. When Massa refused to meet with them, they set up an encampment where they stayed overnight.

The mobilization was called by a collection of social organizations known as the Unidad Piquetera (Picketers Unity). They came to Buenos Aires to demand that the government of Alberto Fernández act to stem the quickening rise in prices in the nation, which has one of the highest inflation rates in the world. Already, official poverty is affecting 40 percent of the population.

Spokespeople for the organizations slammed Massa for being in the back pocket of the International Monetary Fund, with which he recently refinanced a \$45 billion debt that entails cuts in public services. They demanded a bonus for “monotributistas” (small business owners and individuals) and a rise in the minimum wage, currently 45,000 pesos (US\$334) per month. They are also calling for nonpayment of foreign debt so that money can be used to attend to the emergency of retirees and precarious workers.

The next day, the encampment broke up without achieving a meeting with Massa. Piqueteros leader Eduardo Belliboni told reporters, “We ask Massa that when they meet on the 22nd, we workers have the opportunity to discuss a salary that exceeds the basic basket.” He added, “We don’t expect Massa to receive us today, but we expect there to be an agenda for a meeting with the workers.”

Belliboni also took a dig at the CGT union confederation: “You have no workers’ demands, are you going to make a march against or in favor of

the Government?” referring to a mobilization planned for August 17.

United States

Bus drivers and other support staff held a protest outside the Cedar Rapids Community School District board meeting August 8 to draw attention to low wages and the resulting lack of bus drivers. The driver shortage has led to situations where mechanics have had to set aside repair work and take over bus routes, with the result that equipment is not being properly maintained.

A bill passed by the 2017 Iowa legislature made further inroads against workers in Iowa, a right-to-work state that bans strikes by public employees. That bill stripped public-sector unions of the right to negotiate health care, pensions, retirement, vacations and other working conditions, leaving the state to dictate these provisions. Workers are only permitted to bargain for base wages. And even here, should an impasse be reached, wage increases are capped at 3 percent or fixed to the Consumer Price Index, whichever is lower.

Jesse Case, an official with the Teamsters union which represents drivers, told the board, “There’s 40 years of labor relations history in this district that is now broken.” Case pointed out the board has gone beyond the 2017 legislation by “removing clauses around school closures, probationary periods, personal illness and disability leave, holidays, recall rights and health and safety, and not allowing the union to have a say at all.”

Bus drivers, for the most part, declined to speak on the record to the media about negotiations, citing a clause in the contract that prohibits them from talking to the press. One bus driver, with 12 years experience, speaking to the Iowa Starting Line, said of the contract, “There isn’t one, basically. They do what they want to do, and we accept it.”

The Independent Pilots Association announced that its 3,314 air cargo pilots voted by 91 percent to ratify the recent tentative agreement reached with United Parcel Service. The union and company announced, without details, that the contract provides increased wages and retirement benefits.

The UPS pilots contract was set to expire September 1, 2023, one month after contracts for UPS drivers and warehouse workers will expire. The contract is now extended until September 1, 2025.

Pilots at FedEx, a competitor of UPS, demonstrated by the hundreds in Memphis, Tennessee, back in June carrying signs that said, “Fix the pension” and “FedEx has failed to deliver.” Pilots are angry that the cost-of-living escalator for pensions has not been updated since 1999.

Meanwhile, the Air Line Pilots Association was compelled to restart negotiations after its 14,000 pilots rejected a tentative agreement approved by the union leadership for a 14 percent wage increase over the next two years.

All the major airlines—Delta, American Airlines and Southwest Airlines—are currently negotiating new contracts under conditions of extreme dissatisfaction by pilots due to understaffing, the pandemic and rising inflation. Two of American Airlines’ regional carriers, Envoy and Piedmont, were compelled in June to increase pay for some of their pilots by 50 percent to retain staff. Flight attendants and other sectors of airline staff are also involved in contract talks.

Health care workers at 39 skilled nursing home facilities across Pennsylvania are possibly heading for a strike. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) filed an unfair labor practices complaint charging that three of the giant chains involved—Comprehensive, Guardian and Priority—are not providing information about health care costs that affect the distribution of \$600 million in state-provided funding, of which 70 percent was supposed to go to staff involved directly in bedside patient

care.

Michelle Smith, a licensed practical nurse for 19 years at The Grove, in Harmony, Pennsylvania, told a news conference, “Since Comprehensive has taken over, it seems everything there has gotten worse: the staffing, the disrespect of the workers and the residents there, and things are just not the same as they used to be.”

Workers complain about low pay and benefits, reduced staff, lack of resources and poor working conditions that are negatively affecting patient care. “We are putting everything into this company, they are benefiting,” said Simone Whyte, an LPN at the Gardens of Blue Ridge in Harrisburg.

The SEIU will be holding strike votes at each of the 39 facilities in the coming days.

Some 300 journalists and other staff for the Thomson Reuters news agency launched a 24-hour walkout August 4 at seven US bureau offices to protest stalled contract talks. The old agreement expired 20 months ago and Reuters has offered no wage increase for the period going back to December 2020 and a mere 1 percent going forward.

This contrasts sharply with record profits being raked in since 2017 and a dividend increase of 29 percent. The company is valued at \$50 billion. The walkout by the Reuters Newsguild was timed to coincide with the global company’s announcement of quarterly earnings which were “better than expected.”

Canada

Some 33,000 provincial government office workers, wildfire fighters, correctional officers and BC Liquor and Cannabis store employees, members of the British Columbia Government Employees Union, entered a legal strike position Monday afternoon nearly five months after their contract expired. Just prior to the expiration of the 72-hour notice to strike, the union announced that only “targeted job action” would kick off the dispute.

Four BC Liquor Distribution Branch wholesale and distribution centres across the province were pulled off the job at 3:30 p.m. In addition, union members at the Wholesale Customer Centre and the Customer Care Centre (Cannabis division) in Burnaby, near Vancouver, were included in the “targeted job action.” However, workers were instructed not to mount a picket line at that location. Retail liquor and cannabis stores will remain open.

Workers had been presented with a miserly wage offer by negotiators representing the New Democratic Party government. With inflation running at over 8 percent and with projections showing the rate will remain high throughout 2022 and into 2023, the last proposal tabled by the government offered 1.5 percent this year, 2 percent the following year and another 2 percent in 2024. The union has insisted on 5 percent in each of 2022 and 2023 or the inflation rate—whichever is higher.

According to provincial legislation, the BC Labour Relations Board has set interim essential service levels in sectors such as prisons and wildfire protection crews.



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