Mexican VW workers vote down contract for second time; British Columbia government workers union terminates strike

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

On September 2, workers at the Volkswagen de México plant in Puebla voted down the proposed Collective Labor Agreement negotiated by the Independent Union of Volkswagen Automotive Industry Workers (SITIAVW) and management by 3,450 to 3,225, with 13 invalid votes. The workers had already rejected an August 9 agreement that had included a 9 percent wage increase.

This time, Volkswagen offered an 11 percent hike—9 percent in wages and 2 percent in benefits—on a two-year contract. However, with inflation in July having already reached 8.15 percent, its highest level in 22 years, workers recognized that the raise would be quickly eaten up by price increases. According to an August 9 Reuters report, wages at the Puebla plant range from US$15 to US$48 a day.

Volkswagen cited the "context and the challenges we face as an industry," i.e., semiconductor shortages, global economic turmoil and the US/NATO war in Ukraine, as the cause for its "deep disappointment" with the vote. However, in a March 11 Volkswagen Group News report, it boasted of achieving "solid results," crowing, "Operating profit before special items almost doubled to EUR 20.0 billion [US$19.9 billion]" in 2021.

In line with Mexican labor law, Volkswagen and SITIAVW can continue negotiating. Despite its stated commitment to "constructive dialogue," the company is not expected to budge from its offer, setting the stage for a legal strike call on September 9.

Workers at Belize's Development Finance Corporation (DFC) headquarters, in the capital city Belmopan, held protests against recent terminations of employees last week. The protests have taken two forms. Beginning September 1, the employees thumped on their desks every hour for 30 seconds. On the same day, the workers walked out and sang union songs outside the office during their lunch break.

Representatives of the Christian Workers Union (CWU), the DFC and the Labor Department met on September 2 over the issue. CWU Belmopan rep Pablo Cawich accused the DFC of "lack of adherence to the [Labor] Act" and said that the union did not accept the redundancy letters the company issued to the terminated workers. The workers, however, had already been given redundancy letters and were escorted out of the building.

The DFC claims that it has followed the protocol as part of a restructuring plan and that it had notified the union of the upcoming redundancies in June. The parties agreed to continue meeting. Other issues, however, have loomed large in workers' concerns, including a proposed 10 percent pay cut and reduction of benefits.

With prices and electricity rates rising and blackouts increasing in Puerto Rico, protests against the privatized electrical service company Luma Energy and the US-imposed Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) continue to erupt, as have confrontations between protesters and police.

On the morning of August 31, protesters blocked a section of Luis Muñoz Rivera Avenue in Hato Rey, a barrio in San Juan, blocking traffic and denouncing pro-business governor Pedro Pierluisi, the FOMB and the US government for the ongoing energy crisis and devastating austerity policies. The police arrived shortly afterwards and ordered them to disperse. Sheriff Johnny Figueroa used a megaphone to threaten "the use of chemical agents or less lethal ammunition" if they did not comply. The cops then arrested about a dozen protesters.

Puerto Rico's infrastructure, including its electrical grid, has eroded from decades of neglect, a situation worsened by natural disasters and Luma's mismanagement in recent years. On September 1, demonstrators brought various appliances—including toasters, televisions, microwaves and even a refrigerator—that were damaged by frequent blackouts and left them in front of the Executive headquarters on Fortaleza Street.

When asked about the protests, Pierluisi told reporters, "In my case, it is impossible for me to please everyone," and repeated his pledge not to resign.

Workers at the Chilean port of San Antonio were called out on a three-shift strike September 1 after months of negotiations with the government of President Gabriel Boric failed to reach agreement over working conditions, pensions and other issues.

About 2,000 port workers, members of the Port Union of Chile, walked out. The union has over 8,000 members at 25 ports and terminals nationwide, but only the San Antonio workers were

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called out.

Among union's demands are an increase in the value of pensions, the lowering of the age for women port workers to apply for pensions, and the decrease in the years of service required before full retirement benefits.

United States

On September 2, some 2,600 University of Wisconsin (UW) Health nurses announced a ten-day notice that they will conduct a three-day strike beginning September 13 to regain bargaining rights lost during the 2011 public workers rebellion against the administration of Republican Governor Scott Walker. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) is currently seeking to obtain union recognition. A strike would come at the same time that 15,000 nurses in Minnesota are also slated to strike.

UW nurses began seeking bargaining rights in 2019, before the outbreak of the pandemic. Since then, COVID-19 has intensified the plague of short staffing and other issues.

The SEIU indicated that UW Health nurses "have been struggling with a dangerous crisis of under-staffing, turnover, cuts, exhaustion and burnout, which has been aggravated by the pandemic and puts patient care at risk." UW Health simply responded that a strike would be "unpleasant… but we will get through it."

Teachers for School District 150 in Peoria, Illinois, voted overwhelmingly to grant strike authorization September 1 after months of negotiations had not produced an acceptable contract. Both the district and American Federation of Teachers Local 780 admit that wages are a stumbling block for the district's 850 teachers.

The average wages for Peoria teachers are $62,140, below the national average of $65,090. But teachers in central Illinois in general are low-paid, with Canton teachers receiving a mere $48,937 and Pekin teachers making $52,249.

District 150 board president Martha Ross said their offer to the union "is among the highest in the state and attempts to keep teacher salaries matching the rate of core inflation." Core inflation removes some of the more volatile items such as food and energy from the other measure, the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

The lopsided strike vote – 780 to 7 – indicates that whatever terms are being offered, they fall short of what teachers are demanding. The union and district will return to mediated negotiations on September 7. Under the law, the union must provide the district with a 10-day strike notice. According to District 150, teachers would not be eligible to strike until mid-October.

Service workers at the University of Minnesota held an informational picket August 30 on the school's Minneapolis campus to call attention to the abysmal wage compensation offered by the state's main institution of higher education. Members of Teamsters Local 320, which represents 1,500 cleaning, maintenance and food service workers are rejecting the university's paltry 3.85 percent wage offer in a two-year contract.

The Teamsters are asking for an overall 10 percent wage increase, still abysmally inadequate, along with a 5 percent increase for high seniority workers at the top of the pay scale. The union is also seeking to increase the minimum starting wage, frozen at $15 an hour since 2017, to $20 an hour.

Teamsters Local 320 conducted a survey of more than 450 of its members and discovered that 62 percent of the workers indicated they could not afford "basic expenses every month." An additional 12 percent reported having suffered homelessness at least once while employed at the university.

The university, in a May 2022 financial presentation, admitted that some 74 percent of its employees are paid "below market" wages. The Teamsters have not conducted a membership strike vote, indicating it will wait until after the resumption of negotiations under a mediator September 8.

Canada

After a two-week "targeted job action" that saw government worker overtime bans and limited strike activity at four BC Liquor Distribution Branch wholesale and distribution centres, and several cannabis centers, officials of the British Columbia General Employees Union (BCGEU) called off all provincial actions as a "sign of good faith" with the New Democratic Party government. Even the limited actions called by the union had caused severe liquor shortages at bars and restaurants throughout the province.

Overall, some 33,000 provincial government office workers, wildfire fighters, correctional officers and BC Liquor and Cannabis store employees have been without a new contract for almost six months. The strike activity, however, involved only a tiny fraction of the union membership.

Workers had been presented with a miserly wage offer by government negotiators. 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. Bargaining now resumes.

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