

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

Salvadoran protesters denounce state of emergency, cost of living

On September 15, Independence Day, members of unions, human rights organizations, student groups and working people marched through San Salvador to protest the policies of right-wing president Nayib Bukele. The mobilization, called the “Great March for Freedom,” was the fifth in a little over a year, and coincided with a military parade designed to celebrate 201 years of independence and the supposed accomplishments of his six-month-old “Exceptional Regime” state of emergency.

Bukele was elected in 2019, and his administration has drawn criticism for carrying out human right violations—under the pretense of fighting gang violence—as well as imposing worsening standards of living on the Salvadorean working class. Over 52,000 arrests, many without warrants and on flimsy grounds, have brought accusations of lack of due process, excessive force, torture, disappearances and deaths in police custody. Prosecutions of news media that publish messages from gangs have brought denunciations of repression of press freedom.

In the economic sphere, Bukele has signed onto international loans that entail attacks on working class living standards, layoffs in public sector jobs, massive public debt and accusations of corruption. Street vendors have experienced harassment and prohibition. The adoption of the Tether cryptocurrency as a national legal tender a year ago sparked fears of instability and inflation; in fact, bitcoin values fell nearly 20 percent shortly afterwards. And the ongoing rise in inflation has exacerbated the working class’s already onerous situation.

Bukele further inflamed opponents’ hostility on Independence Day by announcing that he will run for reelection in 2024. Although reelection goes against the Constitution and custom, Bukele has packed the courts with compliant judges who ruled last September that he could seek a second consecutive term.

One-day strike and protests in Uruguay demand wage hikes,

increased housing and improved education budgets

Uruguay’s Inter-Union Workers Plenary-National Workers Convention (PIT-CNT) called a national 24-hour strike for September 15. The PIT-CNT claimed that “more than twenty social organizations” representing university students, educators, retirees, pensioners and the poor joined the mobilizations around the country and that the numbers adhering to the call surpassed a million.

Medical facilities partially ceased operating except for emergency and critical care. Public schools closed down as well.

Demonstrators voiced their opposition to the right-wing policies of President Luis Lacalle Pou and the deaf ear his government has turned to their demands. Those policies include proposed “reforms” of social security and public education, privatizations and budget cuts. While the gross domestic product has grown recently, so have inequality and the cost of living for the working class.

Argentine teachers reject government-union wage agreement, vote to return to strike

Following an agreement reached September 14 between teachers unions and the government of western Argentina’s San Juan province, a group of “self-convened” (autoconvocados) teachers announced that they would not accept the pact. The teachers resolved to continue their strike and mobilize the next day in front of the Civic Center in the province’s eponymous capital.

The self-convened teachers, who organized and communicated through WhatsApp, rejected the distribution of the 35 percent raise over four months—7, 11, 7 and 10 percent respectively from September to December—because, as one teacher told Diario Huarpe, “the government and the unions did not take into account the request that we submitted or what we stated last June regarding to not want increases in quotas because they are lost in the galloping inflation that all workers suffer.” The teachers demanded the immediate payment of the entire raise.

On September 16, the teachers struck and marched to the Civic Center, cutting off traffic to the two streets intersecting at the building. They delivered a statement to Minister of Government Alberto Hensel explaining their stance and requesting the intervention of Governor Sergio Uñac.

United States

Contract impasse continues at major Portland, Oregon, hospital

The union representing 7,400 workers at the Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) in Portland, Oregon, hospital system declared an impasse on August 31, paving the way for a possible strike as early as October 7. Members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 328 voted by a 94 percent margin on August 26 to authorize strike action.

AFSCME is asking for a 24 percent increase across a three-year contract while OHSU is only offering 12 percent. But the backdrop to the labor negotiations is an economic crisis for OHSU. The system registered a \$77 million loss for the first 11 months of its 2022 fiscal year.

The hospital attributes its losses to the pandemic and a wave of resignations by beleaguered health care workers who refused to continue working under the punishing conditions. OHSU was then compelled to hire expensive traveling health care workers. This in turn has fueled dissatisfaction among permanent employees, who refuse to shoulder the institution's losses.

The hospital comprises a third of OHSU's workers and the system operates three campuses, making OHSU one of the largest employers in Portland.

Santa Cruz, California, city workers reject contract, authorize strike

City workers in Santa Cruz, California, voted by a 95 percent margin to reject the city's "last, best and final" offer September 13. Service Employees International Union Local 521 reported that the 600 public works, parks and recreation and sanitation workers have also authorized strike action.

The city offered a 3.5 percent cost-of-living increase over a one-year period. But workers are demanding a 7.5 percent COLA, a one-time \$4,000 payment for working through the pandemic and are requesting the city assume responsibility for paying 2.5 percent of pension costs.

Fueling the opposition by workers to the city's offer is not only inflation and the rigors of the pandemic, but a housing crisis. The National Low Income Housing Coalition's annual report reveals that Santa Cruz and the Watsonville area is the second most expensive region in the nation for renters.

New talks are being scheduled and the union has not set a date for a strike.

Canada

Port of Quebec dock workers locked out

Eighty-one longshore workers in Quebec City, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), were locked out on September 15 after voting overwhelmingly to strike on August 30. The union was in a legal strike position beginning on September 11, but did not call out their members, leaving the initiative for a lockout in the hands of their employer, La Societe des arimmeurs de Quebec.

Alongside demanding a wage rise that maintains their living standards against the current and projected inflationary spike, workers are opposing the employer's demand that they accept a grueling and unsafe 12-hour shift schedule.

The Port of Quebec processes over 28 million tonnes of cargo a year. It is one of the top five ports in the country. It also is an important tourism hub, with more than 236,000 visitors passing through per year on international cruises.

The struggle on the docks follows on the heels of a major battle in the Port of Montreal over grueling work schedules, a vicious disciplinary procedure, unsafe working conditions and speed-up that took place in the summer of 2020 and then again in April 2021.

Despite voting three times in favor of strike action since their contract expired at the end of 2018, 1,150 Montreal longshore workers were prevented from striking until July 2020, when a limited strike took place. This was due both to reactionary labour laws and to deliberate stalling on the part of the CUPE leadership. The following month an all-out strike was launched. It was sabotaged by the union after only 12 days, but not before demonstrating the enormous social power of the dockworkers.

Then in April of the following year, after workers re-started strike action, Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government criminalized the walkout by the dockers and ended the strike after only four days with the full support of the provincial government.



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