

Argentine oil workers strike over safety after refinery explosion, San Francisco restaurant workers walk out

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

Oil workers in Argentina strike over deaths of coworkers in explosion and fire

Argentina's largest oil union called a walkout over safety after an explosion and fire at the Plaza Huincul oil refinery in Argentina's Neuquén province killed three workers in the early morning hours of September 22. The tragedy began with an explosion at a crude oil storage tank, causing a blaze that quickly spread to six trucks and a building where the workers were laboring.

The three victims were Victor Herrera, (58); Fernando Jara (34) and Gonzalo Molina (31). Mr. Herrera had 15 years at the plant, which is owned by New American Oil (NAO), and was about to retire, according to his son Gabriel. It was not until September 24 that the bodies were delivered to the grieving families.

In a social media post, the Herrera family declared, "Lives are worth more than their profits" and "it was not an accident. ... There are three families destroyed by business negligence. We are still in Cutralco, waiting for the bodies. With torn souls and clenched fists. Justice Now."

At the funeral, which was held for all three of the deceased, Gabriel told how his father had frequently criticized NAO for its lax policies regarding security flaws in connections and tanks, calling it "a completely flammable time bomb." He referred to an incident last December that was very similar to the one that killed his father and had resulted in three fatalities.

With the anger of workers and their families rising, the Private Oil and Gas Union of Río Negro, Neuquén and La Pampa called a "total stoppage of activities" and issued a statement saying, "Urgent action must be taken to end the continuing disregard for workers' lives as if they were interchangeable parts. We are tired of denouncing situations that are constantly repeated in each field or installation of the industry."

Representatives of the union, the Hydrocarbon Industry and officials of the government of the province of Neuquén held a tripartite meeting September 23 that resulted in a seven-point agreement that the parties claimed would "improve the quality of security and controls" in the industry. By that afternoon, the union had lifted the strike.

Guyanese sugar cane foremen/forewomen protest unequal treatment

Some 40 field foremen and forewomen at the Guyana Sugar Corporation's (GuySuCo) Blairmont Sugar Estate in Guyana protested with a picket line in front of the estate manager's office on September 22. Their protest was directed against the awarding of a 5 percent raise to three foremen with less seniority than they have. With fewer years of experience, those foremen are earning more than the others.

The protesting workers had expressed their displeasure to the estate manager on September 20 but were unhappy with the outcome. The manager shrugged off responsibility for the test and subsequent raise onto the GuySuCo head office. The protesters allege discrimination against the older workers.

Of the dozens of foremen/forewomen who work at Blairmont, only 12 were given the chance to take the test. Of those, three scored over 80 percent, qualifying them for the raise. The protesters say that they were not made aware of the test nor had the opportunity to take the test. They also said that they knew of no criteria for taking the test.

On the same day, workers at the Uitvlugt Estate in West Coast Demerara picketed against unequal treatment in the granting of raises and management's evasions and stonewalling on the issue.

Trinidad and Tobago: Teachers union calls half-day strike over insufficient pay increase

The Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA) called a half-day strike for the morning of September 22 to protest the meager 4 percent wage increase offered by the office of the Chief Personnel Officer (CPO). TTUTA claimed that the action was successful in the sense that over 75 percent of educators heeded the call and that the turnout of students was low.

However, union officials expressed disappointment that the CPO has refused to meet with them. Instead, the CPO has sent letters to the union and refused direct negotiations. The CPO has said repeatedly that the 4 percent raise is "final."

Despite the CPO's intransigence and the willingness of the teachers to take action, the union continues to call for limited measures while expressing its desire to "go around the table where he can clearly articulate his position, where we can articulate our position and have some meeting ground in the middle—that kind of thing," as the TTUTA first vice president, Marlon Seales, recently told reporters.

On September 5, the first day of school, the TTUTA called on teachers to "rest and reflect" for that one day. After the September 22 half-day stayaway, the union issued an "advisory" to its members to "once again take time to reflect" on September 26, Budget Day, while the union "will continue to reach out to the Office of the CPO, as we do our part to keep

the lines of communication open.”

Costa Rican social security workers hold two-hour work stoppage over wage raise rescission

Employees for the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS) stopped working from 6:00 to 8:00 a.m. September 22 at its headquarters in San José. They took the measure to protest the reversal by President Rodrigo Chaves of a monthly salary raise approved by its board of directors. Chaves claimed that with the country going through a fiscal crisis, “the country doesn’t have the resources.”

The National Union of Nursing and Allied Workers (SINAE), the National Union of Employees of the Fund and Social Security, the Costa Rican Federation of Health Workers, the Pharmacy Union and the National Association of Public Employees called the limited action.

The raise that Chaves rescinded was for 7,500 colones, or US\$11.78. The protest was also directed against Chaves’ dismissal of the CCSS president, Álvaro Ramos. SINAE Secretary General Lenin Hernández described the move as being “in the worst dictatorial style, [and] seems very bad, excessive.”

Union reps met with the CCSS general manager, Marta Esquivel Rodríguez, after the protest. They announced a possible strike, but have not determined if or when.

United States

One thousand San Francisco airport restaurant workers strike

After nine months of futile negotiations, restaurant workers at San Francisco International Airport walked off the job Monday. The 1,000 cashiers, cooks, baristas, bartenders, servers and dishwashers are members of Unite Here Local 2.

The typical wage for the workers is in the range of \$17 an hour, not enough money to live in the high-priced Bay Area. Most workers rely on multiple jobs to survive. The city’s minimum wage is \$16.99 and some workers say they have not gotten a pay increase in decades, a testament to the worthlessness of the Unite Here union.

The walkout came after workers returned a resounding 99.7 percent strike authorization vote. In addition to low wages, workers are resisting employer demands for higher out-of-pocket health care costs. Workers also face grueling overwork due to staffing shortages.

One worker told local media, “Wages for us are really, really low. It’s not enough for me to support my family.” She added that she often has to sleep in her car or inside the airport between shifts, since there isn’t enough time for her to make the commute to and from her home in San Jose.

Company brings armed guards into negotiating session involving Iowa strike

Company negotiators for Ingredion in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, brought armed security guards into bargaining sessions with the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM) Local 100G. Some 120 workers went on strike on August 1 after rejecting the

company’s “last, best and final offer” by a 96 percent margin.

The BCTGM called the action “despicable” but has left the eight-week-old strike isolated while Ingredion has brought in replacement workers.

Ingredion, which purchased the starch manufacturing plant in 2015, is demanding a host of concessions, including increased health care costs, alterations in seniority and vacations, and new scheduling. Workers also detest the current two-tier wage system.

Ingredion is a leader in developing, producing and marketing specialty ingredients for industrial and food applications. It employs 12,000 workers at 44 facilities and has markets in 120 countries.

Garfield Heights teachers vote for 10-day strike

Teachers in Garfield Heights, Ohio, voted unanimously to authorize a 10-day strike after more than 200 teachers met September 23 to review the results of five months of contract negotiations. The Garfield Heights Teachers’ Union (GHTA) did not set a strike date despite teachers having been without a contract for three months.

Back in June, teachers held a demonstration to call attention to the fact that Garfield Heights teachers are the lowest paid teachers in Cuyahoga County. Garfield Heights is a suburb of Cleveland.

New York property maintenance workers vote to authorize strike

Hudson Valley building maintenance and service workers employed by the property services company Building & Realty Institute of Westchester voted to authorize a strike September 20. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 32BJ, which represents 1,400 workers who perform services for some 100,000 residents, have supposedly come to terms over health care and pensions, according to the employer.

But Tony Castiglione, a superintendent of Westgate Park Condominium in Yonkers, told News12, “It’s not acceptable. They want to set us back years. If you reduce the staffing, the workload doubles, which it has already tripled since the pandemic and it’s going to affect the morale.”

The current contract will expire September 30. Negotiations are ongoing.

United Airlines flight attendants to picket this week to protest intolerable working conditions

Flight attendants at United Airlines are set to picket 18 airports September 27 to protest intolerable working conditions and scheduling problems that have sometimes left flight crews stranded without accommodations. The pickets will cover airports in the US as well as Guam and London Heathrow.

One of the main complaints is that it is often impossible for flight attendants to contact schedulers and that they are often left in the lurch with no transport or accommodation if there are flight delays or schedule disruptions.

In a poll conducted by the Association of Flight Attendants only 1 percent of respondents said they felt management valued their contributions. Ninety-seven percent said that crew scheduling issues were not addressed in a timely manner.

One-day walkout at Fresno nursing home over staffing, poor working conditions

Members of the Service Employees International Union at the Sunnyside Convalescent Hospital in Fresno, California held a one-day strike last week over low staffing levels, high turnover and other issues

The union says contract negotiations at the facility have stalled and called the turnover rate among employees “alarming.” One local SEIU official told the *Fresno Bee*, “You can’t tell workers their paychecks have bounced and that their health care is cancelled.” During the strike pickets said management summoned a local sheriff’s deputy to harass strikers.

The union has set October 6 as the date for an indefinite strike if issues are not resolved.

Canada

Union hails concessions contract as Mount Pearl municipal strike ends in Newfoundland

Two hundred municipal workers began returning to their jobs last week after ratifying a new four-year contract with the City of Mount Pearl that ended a 12-week strike. The workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), are employed 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 new collective agreement covers the period of July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2026. With inflation continuing to spike across the country, including hikes in food costs currently running at more than 10 percent, the strikers were demanding wage increases that would shield them against an inflationary crisis that shows little sign of ending.

The new contract includes a 9 percent wage increase, which over the four-year life of the agreement actually translates into a wage cut when cost-of-living projections are included. In addition, the deal cuts three sick days and only addresses that loss with the addition of two personal leave days.

Due to the considerable opposition to the concessionary contract, the union declined to release a tally of the actual ratification vote. Despite the significant cut to real wages when factored in over the life of the deal, local union president Ken Turner extolled the settlement, telling reporters that it was “a fair deal for our members, the city and residents.”



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