

Dockworkers strike in Chile and Argentina; Sun Country flight attendants authorize 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 May 23, Chilean dockworkers in the adjoining ports of Panul and San Antonio (located south of the port city of Valparaiso) went on strike, rallied outside the ports and set up soup kitchens. The workers complain that they are being kept in the dark by their own unions that are negotiating a new contract with the port management.

Neither the details of the negotiations nor the demands of the three unions representing the dockworkers have been made public or revealed to workers.

The previous Monday, the workers paralyzed the ports of Zarate and Campana, in the lower Parana River in Argentina, disrupting export trade. Pickets blocked 500 trucks from entering the ports, and ships were unable to deliver their cargo, affecting agricultural commodities (fertilizers, grains), mining (lithium), automobiles and other products.

The workers are demanding from the owner of the ports, the Chamber of Private Commercial Ports, a 38 percent raise for the months of April, May and June plus a bonus of 100,000 pesos, to “beat inflation” (currently at a yearly rate of 110 percent). Management is offering 26 to 30 percent for those three months.

The strike lasted only a few hours. It was shut down by the dockworkers union FEMPINRA in response to government demands for mandatory arbitration. Like longshore unions across the world, FEMPINRA is following a negotiating strategy based on isolating the struggles of dockworkers to the benefit of governments and employers.

The Zarate-Campora ports are part of an ocean/river corridor (Hidrovia) that links industrial and agricultural trade throughout Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentina.

Last Tuesday striking school cafeteria food handlers rallied in several cities in Chile. The protest strike was over working

conditions at public schools. The strikers marched and rallied in the northern regions of Tarapacá, Antofagasta and Atacama, and in Los Lagos to the south, denouncing over-work and abuse. School rules call for one food handler for every 70 school children. However, in the city of Iquique (Tarapacá region), 500 students are served by only four food handlers.

Strikers report having to deal with scarcity of food items that are coming in late and in a bad state, making it impossible to comply with feeding protocols, forcing them to prepare meals badly. They are also demanding better safety equipment and better safety training.

Last Wednesday, May 24, scores of nurses in the Ramos Mejia Hospital in Buenos Aires took over their trade union office (SUTECBA), following the announcement that their wages would only go up 8 percent. With the latest raise, nurses are earning 120,000 pesos a month, less than \$500 US and about two-thirds of the poverty level. (The so-called Basic Family Basket for a family of four for March 2023 was 195,000 pesos.) Greater Buenos Aires nurses are demanding an emergency raise of 60 percent.

As they occupied the union local hall, nurses chanted “Strike, Strike, Strike!” While nurses protested at the Ramos Mejia Hospital, mass rallies of nurses and health care workers took place in hospitals and primary care clinics across the Greater Buenos Aires.

Buenos Aires nurses continued to protest throughout the week. This week they will set up soup kitchens in various Buenos Aires locations.

On Saturday Rio de Janeiro educators and school employees decided to continue their strike that began on May 17. They are demanding changes to the current education system that better respond to the needs of teachers and students, and salary increases that better correspond to the cost of living in Brazil.

On May 10 Governor Cláudio Castro proposed inadequate increases in starting wages for full-time teachers earning over \$840 US, triggering the strike.

Teachers are also demanding that changes that were made to the curriculum during the regime of President Jair Bolsonaro be rescinded. These changes included making geography, biology, physics and history electives at all levels of instruction.

According to the Rio de Janeiro teachers union (Sepe-RJ), 80 percent of the teachers and other employees of the 1,200 Rio de Janeiro schools voted to continue the strike.

United States

Flight attendants for the low-cost, Minnesota-based carrier Sun Country voted by a 96 percent margin to reject a tentative agreement covering the 600 members of Teamsters Local 120, in voting concluded May 22. The result came as a rebuke to the union, which earlier claimed the agreement reached back in March “significantly improves members’ wages and working conditions.”

Shortly after settling the tentative agreement, Sun Country reported a record-breaking \$38 million in profits for the first quarter, compared to \$3.6 million in the first quarter of 2022.

Flight attendants want a significant hike in wages and a reward for taking furloughs during the pandemic. Reportedly, flight attendants are demanding their compensation rival the big airlines, as opposed to the inferior standards of a low-cost airline.

In June 2022 the airline’s mechanics unionized with the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association. In January of this year, 270 fleet service workers voted to affiliate with the Teamsters.

The union for teachers in Fresno, California, has called on members to vote for strike authorization next October unless the Fresno Unified School District agrees to meet teachers’ demands for higher wages and benefits, along with smaller class sizes and more mental health services. by September 29. Teachers want wage increases of 27 percent and bonuses of \$27,500.

In particular, the Fresno Teachers Association has submitted what it is calling a “last, best and final offer.” Rather than triggering a strike, a final offer would bring on mediation. The district plans to make its proposal in June.

Master Lock announced May 24 it will close its Milwaukee, Wisconsin, manufacturing facility. The company announced it will transfer production elsewhere in its global operations.

UAW Region 4 issued a press release saying, “We are disgusted, yet again, as another profitable corporation has decided to close the doors of a manufacturing icon in corporate America’s never-ending quest for profit, without any regard for the people amassing their wealth. The company informed workers today that their jobs would be outsourced beginning this fall.”

The UAW gave no indication they will fight the shutdown, despite the fact that auto contracts will expire at the same time Master Lock ceases its operations.

The company said it is “committed to helping all of its

displaced workers throughout the process by working closely with UAW Local #469 ... to ensure a smooth transition.”

Canada

Housing workers, members of the Nunavut Employees Union, a subsidiary of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), are marking 70 days on strike this week in a bitter fight against the housing authority of the Arctic territory’s capital city.

Last March workers walked off the job after refusing to consider a derisory wage offer of 1.25 to 1.5 percent a year. Shortly after the walkout, management at the Iqaluit Housing Authority issued a lockout notice against the workers and recruited scab labour. The strikebreaking operation has continued throughout the course of the dispute.

Union officials have called upon federal Liberal Minister of Labour Seamus O’Regan to implement anti-scab legislation—a promise that has often been made to federal workers across the country and never carried through by a steady line of labour ministers of the big business Liberal Party.

In a cynical attempt to end the labour dispute, management recently withdrew its lockout notice and encouraged the strikers to accept a new offer that failed to address demands for higher wages due to soaring inflation and cease its drive to cut benefits. The new offer is for a miserly 7.5 percent wage increase spread out over five years. The proposal also includes cuts to maternity leave and vacation time. Management offered a 3.5 percent signing bonus to entice workers to end their strike. Workers, however, have rejected the new offer outright.



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