

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

## Educators strike in three Argentine provinces

On Tuesday May 30 a massive march and rally took place in the northern city of Salta, near the Bolivian border. Teachers and health workers carried signs and chanted “Salud y educación, un solo corazón” (“Health and Education, together in one heart”). The educators are in the second week of a strike over wages and working conditions. The strike and mobilizations are taking place in opposition to the union bureaucracy, as an independent initiative by the education workers, after repudiating an agreement between the trade union leaders and the Provincial government.

Joining the teachers and school employees were doctors and public health workers (also *autoconvocados*) in solidarity with teachers who have suffered arrests and police repression since the strike began (19 teachers were arrested using the pretext that they were blocking traffic).

The demonstrators insist that they and the independent public workers front that they are part of are the only ones fighting for “a minimum wage, better working conditions and government spending to improve schools and hospitals.”

In the adjoining province of Jujuy, teachers voted to strike on Monday, June 5.

Parallel to the Salta and Jujuy educators, teachers and school employees are also striking in the southern province of Chubut, in opposition to austerity policies being imposed by the provincial administration to comply with the demands of the International Monetary Fund. Things have gotten so bad in Chubut that teachers report having to use their own resources to buy school supplies for their classrooms and help feed their students.

## Striking Cananea copper miners end highway blockade following promises by Mexican President Lopez Obrador

Last week, scores of striking mine workers, members of Local 65 of the Mineworkers Union, blocked the highway that links the states of Sonora with Baja California and Chihuahua, in northern Mexico. The miners at the Cananea copper mine have been on strike since 2007, probably the longest strike in world history.

The strikers have repeatedly charged that Mexican politicians are in league with the mining interests and are indifferent to strikers’ fate. Seventeen months ago, when the current round of negotiations began, under the Lopez Obrador administration, government officials had declared that the issues would be settled in “ten days.”

The owner of the mines, German Larrea, corporate owner of the

politically very powerful Grupo Mexico mining and rail conglomerate and the second wealthiest person in Mexico, has consistently refused to negotiate with the miners, effectively converting the strike into a lock-out.

Grupo Mexico have also refused to take any responsibility for the 65 dead miners of the 2006 Pasta de Conchos coal mine collapse. The bodies of 63 of the 65 miners were never recovered due to an agreement between Grupo Mexico, the Mexican Government and the miners’ union leaders.

The miners lifted the blockade on June 3, following a new promise by President Lopez Obrador to resolve the issue. None of the issues raised in 2006 and 2007, such as poverty wages, slave-like working conditions and extremely unsafe conditions, have been resolved.

## Irapuato, Mexico maquiladora workers on strike

Employees of the Freeport factory in the central Mexico city of Irapuato declared a strike on May 30. The workers are demanding that the company make good on its profit-sharing promises. Freeport is a “maquiladora”—a firm that produces in Mexico and exports to the US, taking advantage of US and Mexican tax benefits and extreme labor exploitation.

On the day of the walkout the company informed its workers that it had generated no profits. Following a refusal by human resources officials to show company ledgers, the workers walked out. The company specializes in frozen fruits and vegetables. It employs 251 workers.

## Members of United Electrical workers prepare to strike Wabtec in Pennsylvania over grievances

Some 1,500 workers at the Wabtec locomotive plant in Lawrence Park, Pennsylvania, a township adjacent to Erie, have authorized a strike when their contract expires June 9. The plant, formerly owned by General Electric, has operated at the site for 86 years. In 2010 it employed 5,000.

In recent years layoffs have decimated the workforce, which at one point reached a low of 700 workers.

Management’s last offer was an insulting 2 percent over the life of the contract and two \$1,500 lump sum payments. Other issues include the pay progression for new hires and the right to strike over grievances, which was stripped out of the previous concessions contract.

In its public statements, the UE has focused almost entirely on the issue of the right to strike over grievances, indicating that they may plan to use that issue as a distraction from the fight for above-inflation pay increases and the abolition of tiers.

Since 2019, when Wabtec bought the plant, it has brought in new work, including biodiesel locomotives and other clean energy projects.

## **Nurses vote strike authorization over lack of proper staffing ratios at Austin, Texas, hospital**

National Nurses United (NNU) announced June 2 that nurses at the Ascension Seton Medical Center in Austin, Texas, voted by a 98 percent margin to grant authorization for a one-day strike. Nurses have made clear their number one demand is for safe staffing ratios.

Matthew Clark, a nurse in the intensive care unit and a negotiating team member told Community Impact that nurses are “leaving in droves.” Community Impact reported he wanted “changes to increase staff levels and ensure safety for staff and patients, including adding updated staffing minimums to the contract and creating a professional practice committee of nurses who can elevate problems and propose solutions to management.”

The 900 nurses at the Austin hospital first organized back in September of last year and began bargaining in November. But nurses are thoroughly dissatisfied with the failure of negotiations.

Nurses in the mother-baby center told KXAN that they are tending to eight patients when the maximum should only be six. Nurses have also filled out “thousands” of objection forms documenting unsafe staffing and other concerns. Nurses report that management tells them they simply throw the forms away.

Ascension is the largest Catholic nonprofit health care system in the United States. Its CEO, Anthony R. Tersigni, makes \$13,627,686 a year.

## **Nurses at Wichita, Kansas, hospital grant strike authorization**

Nurses at Ascension Via Christi St. Francis hospital in Wichita, Kansas voted by a 93 percent margin May 31 to authorize a strike. Nurses are seeking safe staffing ratios, increased recruitment and retention, along with a workplace violence prevention policy.

Nurses at St. Francis voted by a two-to-one margin in November 2022 to organize under National Nurses United. Meanwhile, nurses at nearby Ascension Via Christi St. Joseph hospital joined National Nurses United last March. The combined bargaining units at the two hospitals total nearly 1,000 nurses and the two units have held joint demonstrations against Ascension.

## **Hawaii Gas workers demand wage and benefit hikes**

Workers for Hawaii Gas launched a strike across the largest island June 1 after company negotiators refused to meet workers’ demands for increases in wages, health care and retirement benefits. The 217 members of Teamsters Local 996, comprising maintenance, clerical, and plant workers and drivers rejected the company’s last, best and final offer before walking out.

Union president Kevin Holu admitted that past gains surrendered by the union motivated the movement of workers. “This has been long coming, as we have made concessions in the past to help the company,” he said. Negotiations between the Teamsters and the company are ongoing during the strike.

Hawaii Gas announced it “has contingency plans in place to reduce the impact to customers. ... Contingency plans involve the deployment of alternative personnel and resources to maintain operations at the best possible level.”

## **Gannett journalists stage corporate-wide walkout to oppose staff downsizing**

Journalists at about two dozen Gannett-owned newspapers staged a walkout Monday in opposition to corporate practices, including the decimation of news staffs. Hundreds took part in the action, the largest labor action in Gannett history.

The strike was timed to coincide with the company’s annual stockholders meeting. The NewsGuild, the union at Gannett, sent a letter to shareholders in May urging a vote of no confidence against Mike Reed, Gannett’s chief executive and chairman. The union complained that Reed’s compensation—\$7.7 million in 2021 and \$3.4 million in 2022—was far too high and was depressing wages.

In response to the NewsGuild, a company spokesperson wrote, “During a very challenging time for our industry and economy, Gannett strives to provide competitive wages, benefits and meaningful opportunities for all our valued employees.”

A reporter from the USA Today Network told the *New York Times*, “Gannett has created news deserts everywhere you look. That’s Mike Reed’s Gannett.” Those taking part in the action included staff from the *Palm Beach Post*, the *Arizona Republic* and the *Austin American-Statesman*.

Gannett owns some 200 daily newspapers in 43 states. It has closed dozens of publications since 2019.

## **Montreal Owens Illinois glass workers continue strike**

Three hundred and thirty workers at the Owens Illinois glass plant in Montreal’s Pointe-Saint-Charles district are entering their fourth week on strike in pursuit of their demands for a significant increase in pay. Strikers point out that wage rollbacks in the last contract, now compounded by the current inflationary spike, have decimated their living standards. The workers, members of the FTQ-affiliated United Steelworkers (USW) union, had voted in early May by more than 97 percent to take strike action to back their demands.

Renewed negotiations with Owens Illinois ended on May 25 after the company tabled yet another derisory wage offer. One of the main products manufactured by the workers is the iconic brown beer bottles popular in Canada. Picket lines have disrupted the operations of the company with considerable impact on customer supply chains throughout the province.



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