

Strike wave in Argentina; UE agrees to last minute contract extension at Wabtec in Pennsylvania

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

Thousands of workers in Argentina are continuing a strike wave that began with teachers and health workers last month as inflation ravages their living standards.

Jujuy Province: This week, road maintenance workers and municipal employees in Jujuy province went on strike in support of the teachers, over their own wage issues, and in defiance of Governor Morales' repressive anti-strike measures.

Santa Fe: Contingent steel workers employed by the transnational Acindar steel corporation in Villa Constitución, part of the industrial area north of Buenos Aires into Santa Fe province, carried out a 24-hour protest strike over wages, back-pay and inhuman speed-ups imposed on them in the last few weeks. Their demands have been ignored by the trade union that represents them.

Buenos Aires: Resident doctors at public hospitals in the Buenos Aires metropolitan region declared on Monday their intention to strike on June 14 over wages. A 60 percent wage increase for the year has already been eaten up by inflation. In addition, the workers are protesting the collapsing state of health care in the city, including the lack of vital equipment, a dearth of pediatric hospital beds, and a shortage of health workers.

Following the collapse of government mandated negotiations, Buenos Aires bus and subway workers are set to strike this Tuesday over wages and asbestos contamination in the subway tunnels.

Transit drivers in São Paulo, Brazil, who operate a system serving some 3 million commuters, are set to walk out June 13.

Among the demands of the strikers are wages and the plans to privatize public transit in the city. The workers are also demanding an end to gig jobs and the hiring of permanent workers.

Workers demand an end to a long-standing agreement between the trade unions that supposedly represent them (CUT/CTB) and management, that allowed the use of temporary and contingent workers.

High school teachers have gone on strike at the 28 public high schools belonging to Mexico City's IEMS (Institute of Superior High School Education). The teachers rejected a wage offer of 2.1 percent per year, way below Mexico's 8 percent inflation rate.

The strikers are also demanding increases in the education budget for infrastructure improvements, the hiring of more teachers and counselors and an improved pension system. The strike ended on June 9, with a sell-out agreement providing only a 3.5 percent wage increase, far below the current rate of inflation. The city claimed there was no money for

anything else.

On June 7, hundreds of steel workers at the Sidor Steel making plant in the Venezuelan State of Bolivar walked-out demanding a wage increase, health benefits, and transportation services to get to work every day.

Workers struck the Sidor plant, currently under government control, last January over the same issues, demanding that wages be set in US dollars, to protect their purchasing power. The issue over what workers call "hunger wages," and poor health and retirement benefits, are the same now as they were then.

Last Sunday, three rank-and-file leaders were surrounded and arrested by the Venezuelan National Guard. Workers are demanding that they be freed. During the week, workers had reported and posted videos online of pickets being harassed by National Guard forces.

United States

Following six weeks of negotiations, a Friday strike deadline passed with no walkout by the 1,400 workers at the Wabtec plant outside Erie, Pennsylvania. Instead the union agreed over the weekend to bring management's "final offer" to a membership vote June 22.

According to a post on the company's website, "The parties worked with the Federal Mediator today to resolve our differences before contract expiration. Although the parties made significant progress in doing so, the parties agreed to briefly extend the current CBA to provide additional time for negotiations."

Negotiations between the United Electrical Workers and the locomotive maker had been ongoing since April 27. Wabtec purchased the former GE Transportation unit in February of 2019 and went on to negotiate deep concessions with the UE. Members of UE Local 506 had overwhelmingly granted strike authorization.

During an interview with local media in April, before negotiations began, Scott Slawson, president of UE Local 506, had stated, "We would never enter into negotiations with the intent of a lockout or strike. If you think that is what is going to happen, you are approaching it all wrong."

The company wants to retain a two-tier system wage that called for a 10-year progression to reach top scale. The union, meanwhile, proposed a modified tier system starting at 80 percent of full scale with 5 percent raises every six months

According to reports, Wabtec had initially proposed a three-year contract that included two 2 percent raises and two lump-sum payments of \$1,500 during the life of a three-year agreement. Management last week reportedly agreed to improve its offer with a \$1 an hour raise on ratification of the contract.

Members of Machinists Local S6 at the Bath Iron Works (BIW)

shipyard in Maine have voted almost unanimously to grant strike authorization. The union covers about 4,250 of the shipyard's 6,500 workers.

The vote comes ahead of the start of contract negotiations with BIW, which is a multi-billion-dollar contractor for the US Navy. Workers struck in 2020 for 63-days. The walkout ended with the union capitulating on the key issue of the use of subcontract workers, who make up a considerable portion of the workforce. The deal also allowed management to retain strikebreakers hired during the walkout while granting a mere 3 percent annual raise.

Some 15,000 hotel workers in Los Angeles and Orange County, California, voted by a 96 percent margin to authorize strike action against 62 hotels, including major chains such as Hyatt, Hilton, Highgate, Accor, IHG and Marriott. The old agreement expires June 30 and a strike could commence as early as July 4, but Unite Here Local 11 has given no indication that it will follow through on the mandate any time soon.

The union has asked for a \$5 an hour wage increase in the first year, followed by \$3 an hour increases in each of the next three years for a total wage hike of \$14.

Driving workers' demands for better wages and health care is the soaring cost of housing in Southern California. A survey commissioned by the union found that 53 percent of workers had either moved in the last five years or would be compelled to move due to ever-increasing rents. The union estimates a worker would need \$39.31 an hour to afford an average two-bedroom apartment in Long Beach or Los Angeles.

The hotel barons, despite being aware of the high cost of housing, have refused to even advance a wage offer in the negotiations that began in April. Peter Hillan, spokesperson for the Hotel Association of Los Angeles declared, "Displacement of workers due to high rental housing costs is not the responsibility of hotel companies..."

Corey Fletcher, who in the past has negotiated on behalf of hotel workers, said of a possible strike and in the wake of profit losses due to the pandemic that the "hotels also don't want another tourism downturn. You can bet that, with this threat of a strike now active, they are quietly looking for strikebreakers. And with so many migrants looking for work in LA right now, that might not be a problem."

Workers at the DeZURIK plant in Sartell, Minnesota, ended their five-day strike June 9 after ratifying a new three-year agreement. The company is a manufacturer of plumbing and heating products.

Details of the agreement are not available, but the strike began June 4 after members of the International Association of Machinists Local 624 rejected an earlier tentative agreement where they were given just 24-hours to review contract details. Workers also rejected an attempt to extend the old agreement.

Workers opposed a two-tier wage structure implemented back in 2014, as well as company proposals related to health care benefits and paid time off. In the case of the two-tier system, workers on the lower tier performing the same work were paid \$3 - \$4 an hour less and they could not graduate to the upper tier, even after 8 years.

In a statement, DeZURIK President and Chief Executive Officer Bryan Burns said his company and the IAM had "a long history of working together... we appreciate our partnership with the union and its shared commitment to that service."

Canada

Halifax Regional Centre for Education (HRCE), 1,800 Education Program Assistants (EPAs), child and youth care practitioners, student support workers, technology and library specialists and pre-primary

school teachers are continuing their fight, now in its second month, against the Conservative Nova Scotia government's attack on their living standards.

Over the course of the dispute, HRCE management has recruited strikebreakers to perform duties formerly done by highly skilled workers who attend to students with disabilities who require educational programming assistance. However, such has been the difficulty of recruiting a scab workforce for these duties that only about 270 of more than 600 students with special needs have been able to return to school. Three thousand pre-primary school students remain away whilst thousands more have seen specially designed courses suspended.

This past weekend, local union officials of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) were presented with a "new" offer from management that stated openly that it contained no new money. Workers already voted overwhelmingly last month to reject a tentative deal that had been strongly recommended by their own union leadership.

The tentative contract offered a paltry 6.5 percent raise over three years. On average, workers earn a gross wage of about \$28,000 per year, reduced after taxes to anywhere between \$20,000 to \$23,000 annually. Since the annual pay is based on 10 months work, the duration of the school year, but paid out over 12 months, workers actually take home from \$365 to \$415 per week.

Top pay for workers with decades of seniority reaches only about \$38,000 per year. For all workers, sky-rocketing insurance premiums have steadily reduced take-home pay due to increased violence in the schools and disability claims from workers either injured in attacks or from the onerous duties associated with some assignments. One striker, showing her pay slips to reporters, demonstrated a 19 percent hike in long-term disability deductions just over the past year.

Despite this, CUPE officials have nonetheless agreed to consider the "new" offer from management. Education authority negotiators, acting on instruction from the right-wing provincial government, have attempted to provide union officials with an "off-ramp" to end the strike without addressing the demands of the striking workers. Thus, the so-called new offer floats the possibility that the authority would re-grade the 1,800 salaried employees to 10-month terms for each year and place them off salary and onto an hourly wage pay schedule.

Workers could thus be laid off for two months each summer and then be eligible to collect unemployment insurance for six or seven weeks (after the two-week waiting period). Not only does this offer not address in any meaningful way the miserable compensation levels currently experienced by the workers, but it also puts into question job security assurances due to the re-grading and can impact long term pension calculations and other benefits.



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