Manitoba Hydro workers strike over wages; Teachers block major highways around Mexico City

Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 July 2023

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

Workers and students in Puerto Rico condemn electricity rate increases

Last Wednesday, hundreds of workers, students and retirees marched in San Juan Puerto Rico, to protest a record rise in household electricity rates by the island-wide LUMA company. Carrying signs saying: “LUMA go to hell,” “LUMA, crooks,” the protesters marched from the Legislature building and rallied at the Governor’s office.

The measure to raise rates is part of a debt resolution package imposed by the Financial Control Board to pay the electric authority’s $9 billion debt. This increase will be followed by yearly increases. Puerto Rican households will now pay $0.34 per kilowatt hour (up from $0.25 in June), compared to $0.14 per kilowatt hour for the average household in continental US.

Over 40 percent of Puerto Rican households live in poverty and are subject to regular electricity black-outs.

Brazilian health workers strike

Nurses and health workers in the state of Pernambuco, in the Brazilian northwest, went on strike on June 29. The strikers are demanded that an agreed-upon wage schedule, later cancelled by the legislature, be implemented. The legislature also imposed working conditions that the workers consider impossible to tolerate.

Oil workers strike and protest in Brazilian state of Ceara

Last Tuesday, Brazilian oil workers held protests against the privatization of the Labor Lubricants and Derivatives Refinery located in the northeastern state of Ceara. The refinery, formerly owned by government oil company Petrobras, was sold to the Grepar Participações group in 2022 for US$34 million, 55 percent less than its market value.

Striking Ceara workers denounced sale of Lubnor, and other privatizations of Petrobras units, and called for a national oil workers strike. In addition to the strike at Lubnor, oil workers across Brazil, launched slowdowns.

Teachers block major highways around Mexico City

Teachers in the State of Mexico blocked major roads connecting eight cities that lie between Mexico City and Queretaro state last Thursday, demanding to be paid wages owed to them since last year and an 8.2 percent wage increase.

They also accused the state government of acts of repression and accused state officials of taking revenge following the electoral defeat of the ruling PRI party in recent elections.

Also protesting unpaid wages were contingent workers at the Fine Arts Museum in Mexico City.

These workers have no union representation or benefits, despite promises by President Lopez Obrador to regularize their status.

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Southwest pilots union seeks to end federal mediated talks

The pilots' union at Southwest Airlines made a request June 29 to the National Mediation Board to end its oversight of contract negotiations. The Southwest Airlines Pilots Association (SWAPA) negotiation committee wrote to the board that "Southwest refuses to engage in substantive discussions or offer ratifiable proposals in the areas of work rules, fatigue mitigation, quality of life provisions, and compensation for its pilots. ... further mediation will likely not result in any additional agreements between the parties."

Back in May, SWAPA's 9,300 pilots voted to give the union a near-unanimous strike authorization after three years of failed negotiations. Some nine months ago, it was the union that requested mediated talks.

The National Mediation Board will create a report before making its decision on the pilots' request. But even should the board grant the request and pilots call for a strike, a 30-day cooling off period would follow, and before a strike could be called, Congress and the US president could intervene to impose a settlement.

Management at Philadelphia Museum of Art reneges on compensation agreement

The union representing workers at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) accused management of violating the compensation clauses of the agreement settled after a 19-day strike last fall. That contract mandated longevity pay increases of $500 for full-time and $250 for part-time workers for every five years of service going back 20 years.

However, PMA CEO Sasha Suda informed the union that beginning July 1, the payments would only apply to workers whose anniversaries fell within the 3-year term of the current contract and instead of being cumulative, would only provide a single $500 or $250 payment, and would not be multiplied for each five-year period of service.

According to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 397, last year's contract contains a no-strike clause. Instead, the union plans to submit to arbitration.

Hydro workers strike in Manitoba and Ottawa

Two thousand three hundred front-line employees of Manitoba Hydro walked off the job last week in a strike demanding a significant wage increase. It is the second job action by the workers, members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), in two years.

The previous rotating, limited strike lasted two months before the Conservative provincial government sent the dispute to binding arbitration according to a 60-day strike termination law in the province. Eventually, a "modest" wage settlement favourable to management was handed down by the government's Labour Board.

Hydro workers are required to maintain basic system coverage during any work stoppage. Strikes can only interfere with after-hours service calls, overtime scheduling and certain stand-by services, but are prohibited from affecting the steady distribution of energy across the province. Workers walked out after management put forth a derisory wage offer of 1.75 percent for 2022, a one-off "service recognition" payment of $1,600 with a 2023 wage offer to be determined later by Manitoba Labour Board arbitration.

Another 400 workers in Ottawa, Ontario are entering their second week of a strike, also for a significant wage increase and stronger safety protections. Those workers voted 74 percent to reject a 4-year contract proposal that failed to address their demands. Local management had offered a paltry 13.6 percent wage increase over 4 years, 3 percent less than the proposal put forth by IBEW officials. Neither offer addresses the real wage reductions already incurred by workers due to inflationary pressures. Management has put contingency plans in place to continue services but response times to rectify local outages have lengthened.

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