

Mass protests in Colombia over gasoline price rises, Manitoba Public Insurance workers strike

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Mass Protests in Colombia over rising fuel prices

Mass protests took place across Colombia on August 28 against price increases in gasoline and other fuels. Demonstrators denounced the decision by the Petro administration to eliminate US\$11 billion in government gasoline subsidies to service fiscal debts and supposedly to free up funds for other social programs.

The fuel increases are pushing up the costs of food and transportation, making it ever harder for working class households to survive.

The price of gasoline in Colombia has risen from 9,000 pesos a gallon in August of last year (US \$2.50) to more than 14,000 currently (\$3.40) as Colombia's government cuts back on subsidies each month. The price of gasoline is expected to reach US\$4.00 a gallon by the end of the year, while diesel fuel prices double.

Nationwide teachers strike in Chile

One hundred thousand Chilean teachers in approximately 5,000 schools went on a nationwide strike early in the morning on August 29. At issue are years of unpaid wages increases and benefits owed to retired teachers, improvements in schools and greater security in schools. Striking teachers also denounced conditions of over work and demand changes in public school schedules.

Popular protests in Panama against mining transnationals

Popular protests took place in Panama City on August 28 against mining contracts being debated in Parliament. Among the demonstrators were Panamanian teachers and members of peasant organizations. All denounced a pact between Panamanian government and a subsidiary of First Quantum, a Canadian mining transnational

firm. The pact involves land-grants across Panama for open-pit copper mines, deforestation, the looting of natural resources and contamination of water.

They accuse the government and the mining firm of corruption, and attacks on ecosystems and demand that a popular national plebiscite be held to approve or reject this and future contracts.

Teachers' strike against Colombia anti-strike law

Teachers in various Colombian states went on strike on August 30 against proposed legislation that would make educators' strikes and protests illegal. Teachers also demand that the government resolve the crisis in health benefits. They denounced delays in doctors' appointments, plus barriers to access medical care and medicines, affecting the health of educators and their families.

The new law, now being debated in the national legislature, declares education an 'essential right.' If passed, this law would automatically bar teachers from striking and protesting.

Workers' protest in Paraguay demands stable jobs

Last Thursday retirees and workers belonging to more than 20 unions rallied in Asunción to demand an end to contingent employment and for steady jobs. At the protest rally, workers focused attacks on the retirement authorities for enacting laws against the public interest. The workers, including teachers and health workers, also demanded the reconstruction of the public schools and public health systems.

Meriden, Connecticut school bus drivers' strike over substandard contract offer

School bus drivers in Meriden, Connecticut, launched a strike September 1 after the New Britain Transportation company failed to provide them a contract that would meet wage, healthcare and

retirement expectations. The strike begins on the third day of classes in the new school year for 8,471 students at Meriden's 13 schools.

The 60 members of Teamsters Local 671 make on average \$20 an hour, which lags behind other area bus drivers who make \$24 an hour. Drivers also receive no paid holidays while the standard is nine days.

Nicholas Frangiamore, a field rep for Teamsters Union Local 671, told the Record-Journal, "They offered 4 percent wage increases, but they are already so far behind the industry standard we can't accept that."

The Meriden Public School System is attempting to break the strike with replacement drivers, something that caused confrontations as strikers set out to block the movement of buses.

Pedro Valentin, one of the strikers, told NBC Connecticut, "We're gonna be on strike, like we said, as long as it takes. As long as it takes, we're gonna be here, because there's no other way. There's no other way that we're gonna be successful if we don't stick together and we go wherever we have to go, as long as it takes to get a contract"

Kentucky Utilities workers granted strike authorization

Workers for Kentucky Utilities (KU) voted overwhelmingly August 24 to grant strike authorization unless the utility which provides electricity for counties in Virginia and Kentucky comes to meet their contract demands. The 60 workers represented by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 2100 charge that KU pays nonunion workers who perform the same work more than union members make.

Local 2100 has filed unfair labor practice charges alleging intimidation by KU, including using layoff threats and the termination of health benefits to curb workers' demands.

Back in July, another section of KU production and maintenance workers at the Earlington operations in Parkway and Green River voted 25 to 17 in a decertification election to retain the Allied Industrial and Service Workers International Union Local 9447-01 as their bargaining representative.

KU is owned by Pennsylvania-based PPL Corporation. PPL employs more than 6,500 workers and had an operating income of just under \$1.4 billion in 2022.

Faculty at Illinois community college system votes to strike

Faculty at the College of DuPage rallied August 25, one day after 93 percent of union members voted for strike authorization. Compensation is a major concern for the 285 full-time faculty members represented in the current bargaining.

David Goldberg, a lead negotiator for the faculty, told the Daily Herald. "We think that the wage losses that people have experienced against 8 percent inflation are something that should be recognized."

The College of DuPage is Illinois' largest community college system with 20,000 students and its main campus based in Glen Ellyn. Faculty members are critical of DuPage's decisions concerning brick and mortar renovations. Since the last contract negotiations in 2019, some 25 full-time faculty members have retired and not been replaced.

"Faculty input into central decisions at the college involving multimillion-dollar initiatives is thin to nonexistent," said Goldberg. "I wish that there would be more of an emphasis on that and less of an emphasis on pretty, bright and shiny things, frankly."

Negotiations began back in February with two rounds conducted under a federal mediator. The union must file a 10-day strike notice before a walkout can begin.

Manitoba Public Insurance workers strike

About 1,700 workers at Manitoba Public Insurance—a provincial Crown Corporation—are entering their second week of a strike for improved wages. The strikers, who administer driver's license renewals, insurance policies and payments and collision damage claims as well as providing driver road testing, are members of the Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU).

The union bargaining committee had rejected an offer for a general annual wage increase of 2 percent per year in a four-year contract. Management, in a bid to divide various groups of workers, had added a one percent "market adjustment" increase for about 75 percent of the employees. In addition, a small number of workers at the top of their pay grades would see a 3.5 percent increase.

Workers have been demanding that their annual wage increase must equal the increases that the Conservative Premier Heather Stefanson and leading members of her government recently awarded themselves. Those raises amounted to 3.3 percent this year and 3.6 percent in 2024 and 2025.

The demand by the Public Insurance workers is the same as that made by 1,400 Liquor Mart and Lotteries workers who had launched a one-month intermittent strike that ended last week. Also, members of the MGEU, the Liquor Mart workers eventually settled for a four-year agreement resembling the 2 percent per year general wage increase now on offer to the Public Insurance workers.



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