

# 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 September 13, half-a-million Government service workers mobilized across Peru demanding better working conditions and an end to government discrimination in job assignments. The 500,000 strikers represent 40 percent of public sector workers. Their working conditions have been frozen for the last 15 years.

While other public sector workers have seen some improvements in wages, benefits and working conditions, service workers only receive wages, and are often employed at the minimum wage.

Eight days ago, University of Panama students blocked a main road in Panama City, near their campus, part of a continuing campaign against the copper mining contract negotiated by Panamanian authorities.

A student spokesperson declared that the contract with Canadian transnational First Quantum Minerals, which gives the company a 40-year right to mine in Central Panama, is illegal and destructive to the natural environment. The agreement grants the firm the right to build its own port, and energy resources. It also prohibits flights over the mine.

Quantum Minerals will have the right to expropriate privately owned land from owners that refuse to sell, including land belonging to indigenous groups.

The student protest was the latest in a continuing wave of rallies and demonstrations by workers, teachers and environmental and indigenous groups.

On Monday, September 11, a general strike took place in Haiti demanding the ouster of Prime Minister Ariel Henry over the government's failure to lower fuel

prices. The protest strike was organized by the National Parents Movement, Educators and Transit Unions. The latter had begun campaigning for a general strike since last July to protest the exorbitant increase in fuel prices, which are exploding in Haiti.

The strikers called for a 40 percent reduction in fuel prices to place them at par with world prices, Prime Minister Henry's resignation for incompetence, and that the government act against the armed gangs that have unleashed a wave of violence and insecurity across the country.

## United States

A strike by 84 workers at the Thombert manufacturing plant in Newton, Iowa, is entering its seventh week over wages, healthcare and working conditions. Members of United Auto Workers Local 997 walked off the job back on August 1.

Workers, who average \$23.50 an hour, are demanding what the union characterizes as "a significant increase to catch up with inflation." They also want more affordable healthcare while the company wants to increase the portion of insurance costs paid by workers. Another issue is the demand for "work-life balance" that in part relates to the demand for increased vacation.

The working conditions are typical sweatshop labor with the machines on the assembly line reaching 260 degrees. Thombert is the world's largest manufacturer of polyurethane wheels and tires for electric forklifts.

The union representing 1,900 cafeteria workers and climate staff for Philadelphia's District 216 schools announced September 10 its members had voted unanimously to grant strike authorization. Members of UNITE HERE Local 634 deride the \$15.50 hourly pay

they currently make as “welfare wages.”

When Local 634 negotiators requested a miserly \$1.50 an hour wage increase for its members, they were told by the district the demand was “not feasible.” The union’s contract expires September 30.

## Canada

About 4,000 workers at Loblaw grocery chain retail stores voted by 97 percent last week to strike against Real Canadian superstores, No Frills and Extra Foods in Manitoba. The workers are organized under the United Food and Commercial Workers union. The contract expires on September 28. Negotiations have slowed around the question of decent pay raises for the low-wage workforce even though Loblaw has made record profits in recent years.

In British Columbia, over 3,000 grocery workers in the Lower Mainland region voted by 98 percent to strike against 40 Safeway and Sobeys stores should a contract not be presented that addresses their demands for a significant wage increase. The United Food and Commercial Workers union has been bargaining for eight months without result. Company management has offered no more than a 1 percent per year wage raise to the low-paid workforce. Safeway and Sobeys’ parent company, Empire, has so far recorded first-quarter net earnings of \$261 million, following on from significant gains made throughout all of last year.

In a related move, UFCW meat, deli and seafood workers at Safeway have scheduled their own strike vote for the end of September.



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