

Workers Struggles: The Americas

23 October 2023

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

Mexican judicial workers protest

On October 16 and 17, federal judicial workers carried out marches and rallies throughout Mexico, protesting cuts in government benefits to the workers.

Protests took place in Mexico City, and in the states of Morelos, Tamaulipas, Puebla, Michoacán, Veracruz and Jalisco.

The mass demonstrations are a response to a decision by the Lopez Obrador administration to cut 13 out of 14 benefits enjoyed by the court and other federal employees up to now, including subsidized transportation, gasoline allowances, and reduced highway tolls. The cuts add up to US\$859 million in 2024. The AMLO administration argues that the benefits involved are “economic benefits of privilege.” The president insists that lower level court workers would not be affected.

However, the Supreme Court acknowledged that at least six of the 14 benefits are obligations that are necessary to guarantee workers social security rights. These include pensions, housing, health coverage, and retirement rights.

In Mexico City and other states, workers rallied at the federal legislature and blocked traffic throughout the city. At one protest in Mexico City, workers burned in effigy a large doll made to look like President Lopez Obrador.

Protests will continue this Tuesday.

Protests continue in Panama over the opening of copper mine

Last Saturday, the Construction Workers Union called for popular protests against a copper mine agreement approved the day before by the administration of president Laurentino Cortizo. The agreement is with Minera Panama, a mining company owned by First Quantum Minerals, a Canadian firm.

Reacting to the agreement, a coalition of labor unions and environmental and student organizations organized a rally at the legislature.

Saul Mendez, leader of the Construction Workers Union, likened the agreement to Panama’s surrendering control of the Panama Canal in 1903 and called for mass protests and strikes against the

agreement.

72-hour protest-strike by Argentine government workers

On Wednesday, October 18, municipal and provincial employees in Santa Fe Province carried out a 72-hour strike demanding wages that keep up with Argentina’s hyperinflation. The workers also rallied at government offices in the cities of Santa Fe, Rosario and other cities, and blocked roads as part of the protest-strike.

Teachers rally in Buenos Aires Province

In Buenos Aires Province, education workers rallied last Thursday in the provincial capital of La Plata to demand the right to strike and an end to wage cuts for strike days, and higher wages that keep up with hyperinflation.

Striking teachers also repudiated the complicity of the educators’ unions with the Peronist provincial government, which have gone along with recent anti-strike legislation.

The teachers occupied the offices of the Labor Ministry for several hours.

As the teachers were leaving the building, Buenos Aires police arrested two of the demonstrators, charging them with damaging the Labor Ministry building. The demonstrators responded with a rally at police headquarters, forcing the release of the arrested teachers.

Buffalo, New York, machinists reject tentative agreement, launch strike

Workers walked off the job at J.M. Smucker’s Milk-Bone plant in Buffalo, New York, October 16, after rejecting a tentative agreement and refusing to extend the old contract. The strikers are comprised of electricians, mechanics, oilers and pipefitters, who are members of the International Association of Machinists Lodge 330.

Workers voted down a company offer by 90 percent that included annual raises of 8, 3 and 3 percent, which strikers

complained had already been eaten up by inflation. Instead, workers are demanding an overall 20 percent wage increase over three years, with an initial 13 percent wage hike in the first year of the contract.

On day three of the strike, police were summoned to the plant after a car struck a striking worker on the picket line.

The company boasted that production continues at the struck plant as the 40 striking workers represent only a portion of the 277 workers at the Buffalo plant. The remaining workers are represented by two other unions.

“We will also maintain production of our Milk-Bone dog snacks at our Topeka, Kansas, manufacturing facility, as well as several co-packers,” said a company statement.

Strike at Maine pulp mill over destruction of job classifications

A third union walked off the job October 16 joining two unions that struck over the weekend at the Woodland Pulp mill in Baileyville, Maine. All three unions are protesting a company proposal to tear up classifications for millwrights, pipefitters, machinists and auto mechanic positions and substitute a general mechanic classification.

The strike involves 22 members of the International Association of Machinists Local 1490, 20 members of Millwrights Local 1121, and 38 members of the Service Employees International Union Local 330-3. “All three unions are very strongly united that they do not want a tiered system that eliminates their core trades,” stated Danny Loudermilk with the Machinists union.

On October 16 a salaried employee struck two workers walking the picket line. Maine Senate President Troy Jackson, who was on the picket line as the incident transpired, told Maine Public Radio, “This car just kept on coming. I’m not saying it was going fast, but she never stopped. She tried to push them out of the way with her vehicle [and] hit one of the guys in the side of the leg and then another guy in the back of the leg.”

The unions have been negotiating since the beginning of August with the most recent meeting on October 3. The next bargaining session is November 8.

Miami workers who prepare meals for airlines demand higher wages

Food service workers for LSG Sky Chefs held a protest October 11, at the company’s warehouses near the Miami International Airport to demand higher wages. The 900 workers, represented by UNITE HERE, who prepare in-flight meals for airlines using the Miami airport, have been without a contract since 2016.

The median wage for Sky Chefs workers is \$15.50 an hour and workers want that hiked to at least \$20 an hour. Living standards for the workers are further compromised by the fact that the Miami

metropolitan area has suffered one of the highest cost-of-living increases in the United States.

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) indicates that inflation in the Miami region rose to 7.8 percent during the 12-month period ending in August. That compares to a national CPI rate of 3.7 percent.

A UNITE HERE survey reports that 92 percent of the workers rent and some 50 percent of that group are unable to consistently cover their housing costs.

Strike nears one month mark for Vancouver sugar refinery workers

As shortages of sugar begin to appear in retail stores and commercial bakeries across British Columbia’s Lower Mainland, 135 workers at the Rogers Sugar refinery are continuing their strike against a whole series of contract concessions demanded by management. The sugar shortages are growing despite the company’s deployment of managerial staff who often sleep inside the plant and try to perform the work of the strikers.

Rogers Sugar is owned by Lantic Inc., which recorded Canadian sales of \$1 billion last year. The company is the largest supplier of refined sugar in Western Canada. The Vancouver refinery also supplies the Western United States.

The workers, members of Local 8 of the Public and Private Workers of Canada, have been without a new contract since February. Workers are demanding a 6 percent wage increase in each year of a three-year contract. Management has offered a paltry 3 percent a year raise in a five-year contract. Workers, who have already suffered real wage losses due to several years of wage erosion due to inflation, earn a base rate of only \$23 per hour.

In addition to the company’s derisory wage offer, it also seeks to cut some health and dental benefits, weaken seniority rights and contract out some jobs to even lower wage third-party employers. Management also seeks to impose an onerous new continuous shifting schedule which would lengthen hours worked at a time and make weekend work mandatory and without overtime payments.



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