

Panamá protests escalate, Vancouver wastewater workers strike

## 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

Last week there were six days of protests in Panamá demanding that the administration of President Laurentino Cortizo cancel its contract with the First Quantum mining corporation to open copper mines in a wooded and biologically diverse region of that Central American nation.

Throughout the week there have been massive protests, where tens of thousands have gathered against the copper agreement.

The protests began Monday, when Panamanian students and teachers joined the protest demonstrations that have shaken the country.

Also, on that first day, the University of Panamá suspended classes so that students could join the demonstrators that had rallied outside. School teachers also rallied in Panamá's capital, while in the outskirts of the city indigenous groups faced tear gas attacks from the national police. In addition, construction workers marched and rallied in other cities in Panamá. There were also blockages of the Pan American Highway that links Panamá with the rest of Latin America.

With chants and banners of "Friendship Yes! Border Wall No!" on Wednesday, Tijuana workers and youth protested at the US-Mexico border near the city of San Diego against the strengthening of the border wall that divides both cities. Construction began last August on the Pacific Ocean; continued across the beach and climbed up to what was once known as "Friendship Park," a place of recreation once shared by citizens of both nations.

The demonstrators blocked construction over the course

of six hours, appealing to the US construction workers that they cease the building of the border wall.

As part of the protest, four demonstrators chained themselves to the metal wall.

The demonstration was organized by the "Friends of Friendship Park," led by Dan Watman, who also chained himself to the fence.

US authorities used the pretext that an existing wall was in "disrepair" and promised to rebuild Friendship Park—on the San Diego side—once the work was done.

On Thursday, October 26, Chilean air traffic controllers held an 8-hour slow-down strike and rally protesting the Boric administration's refusal to negotiate over their demands on wages, upgrading air-traffic equipment and improving working conditions.

The job action caused flight delays and flight cancellations across Chile. Leaders of the Air Traffic Controllers Union (Colegio de Controladores Aéreos) pointed out that, barring investments in new, high-tech equipment, the safety of pilots and passengers may be in danger.

If the government continues to ignore their demands, the air traffic controllers are threatening a strike.

On October 24 and 25, Uruguayan public-school teachers and students carried out a 48-hour strike across Uruguay against an educational reform law backed by the current government that would benefit private schools and negatively impact the nation's public school system. The law also attacks teachers' wages, benefits and working conditions.

During the strike many schools were occupied by striking teachers. On Wednesday, there was a massive rally at the Education ministry in Montevideo.

### United States

Workers at the East Dubuque Nitrogen Fertilizers plant in East Dubuque, Illinois, are coming to the end of their second week on strike. The 94 members of United Auto Workers Local 1391 voted down the company's last offer and began their strike on October 18.

The union has made public the workers' demand that the company guarantee the employer's match for the 401(k) retirement plan over the life of their contracts. Local 1391 President Doug Glab told the *Telegraph Herald*, "We went into negotiations with the company, but we just weren't making any ground. We aren't asking for a lot, but we have a lot of good people who have families to support."

The company issued a statement, declaring, "... we have contingency plans in place to ... provide uninterrupted service to our customers." The UAW only represents 60 percent of the 150 workers at the plant.

East Dubuque Nitrogen Fertilizers is owned by CVR Partners, based out of Sugar Land, Texas. The parent company also owns Coffeyville Resources Nitrogen Fertilizers, LLC in Coffeyville, Kansas.

Some 1,200 nurses and nurse practitioners at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, voted October 18 to strike the area's largest hospital facility. Plaguing the nurses are the same conditions of understaffing and burnout from overwork.

The University of Pittsburgh carried out a study in 2022 that found more than 93 percent of Pittsburgh-area nurses were contemplating leaving the field of nursing due to the long-term understaffing that has been severely exacerbated by the pandemic.

The Service Employees International Union, which represents the nurses, is calling for a \$40 an hour minimum wage along with significant increases for higher seniority nurses. Bargaining between the SEIU and hospital management is ongoing. The union will have to give a 10-day notice before striking.

Heavy equipment mechanics at the Coffin Butte landfill near Corvallis, Oregon, have entered their second month on strike as they struggle to secure their first labor agreement with Valley Landfills. The seven strikers maintain heavy equipment used to operate the landfill and they voted back in December 2022 to join Operating Engineers Local 701.

One of the motivations to launch their strike on September 11 was the decision by the company to hike health insurance to \$400 a month out of pocket. The union is seeking to switch workers to a cheaper union-run plan.

Meanwhile truck drivers at the Coffin Butte landfill will

be voting November 1 on whether to join Teamsters Local 324. Valley Landfills is a subsidiary of Republic Services, the second-largest waste disposal company in the United States.

## Canada

About 670 tradesmen, engineers and technologists employed in Metro Vancouver's extensive wastewater system are entering their third week on strike for a significant wage increase commensurate with similar workers in other municipalities. The workers, members of the Greater Vancouver Regional District Employees' Union (GVRDEU), operate water treatment, disinfection and distribution facilities and participate in watershed management and infrastructure development projects.

The workers initially struck all five wastewater treatment plants spread across Vancouver and into New Westminster and North Vancouver. But after contract discussions stalled, pickets were set up at a sixth facility shared with the outlying city of Surrey. The union has also instructed members in the separate water services department who are not currently on strike to refuse overtime and standby duties. In total, the affected area impacts 2.8 million residents. A portion of the workforce has been designated as "essential" in order to ensure that the system continues to perform its basic functionality.

Management has offered a paltry 11.5 percent wage rise spread out over three years as well as a one-time lump sum payment of 4.5 percent that is meant to account for previous wage erosion due to spiking inflation. The last contract expired on December 31, 2021. Workers argue that the offer does not insulate them from real wage losses over the last contract nor does the wage offer for the next three years meet industry standards.



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