Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Panama marks 27 days of protests against mining contract

Protests continue to block economic activity in Panama over the awarding of a copper mining contract to Canadian mining company First Quantum Minerals. Workers are concerned over the environmental impact of a large open pit mine in central Panamá.

The latest protests in Colon Province, near the First Quantum Minerals copper mine concession, include fishers and rural workers, who are preventing the movement of ships headed toward the company-owned port.

"We congregate in defense of life, water and the air that we breathe for the enjoyment of our families and children, declared Carlos Cruz, a shipper and teacher.

General strike in northern Dominican Republic

On November 13, workers carried out a 24-hour general strike paralyzing the Ciboa region of the Dominican Republic. The strike took place in the face of government threats and arrests.

The purpose of the strike was to demand that the government improve health services, build schools, lower the price of food and fuel, and improve electricity services.

The Luis Abinader administration arrested strike leaders in the hours preceding the strike. During the strike the city of Santiago de los Caballeros was occupied by military personnel.

Argentine steelworkers block plant

On November 12, temporary workers employed by Indumec, assigned to maintaining the Acindar Steel plant in Villa Constitucion, north of Buenos Aires, blocked entrances to the plant, and paralyzed its activities, demanding that they be hired as permanent workers and that they be paid three months back-wages.

Wages for permanent steel workers have been very negatively affected by inflation, making it impossible for their families to make it to the end of the month; many are forced to work extra hours. Temp workers are in a worse situation, earning hunger wages.

Chicago healthcare workers carry out two-day strike to press contract demands

Healthcare workers for Howard Brown Health concluded their two-day strike November 15 as workers demonstrated their dissatisfaction with management's recent offer. The 366 workers at 10 clinics across Chicago, Illinois, are seeking to boost the minimum wage from $16.07 an hour to $21, obtain more affordable health insurance and increased protections from layoffs.

Nurse practitioners, medical assistants and patient service representatives voted by a 96 percent margin to call the two-day strike. Meanwhile, the union has been carrying out a vote on the most recent contract that was to conclude November 19. Negotiations were to continue the following day.

A new policy to shorten the time for patient visits escalated the ire of workers. Andrea Villanueva told WLS, "To rush an appointment is to require someone to either skip a need that they have or have it pushed through in a way that may lead to mistakes getting made by the provider or someone else down the line. It is risky for our patients' care and we think it's unacceptable."

Minnesota rural mail carriers picket to protest overwhelming workloads created by the addition of Amazon deliveries

Rural mail carriers in Bemidji, Minnesota, are holding daily informational pickets to protest long hours, a lack of personal time off and the deluge of Amazon deliveries that are pushing aside traditional mail. Starting November 1, management for the Bemidji postal region implemented the United States Postal Service's agreement with Amazon to combine the web behemoth's package deliveries in addition to USPS's mail service.

Dennis Nelson, a 20-year veteran of the USPS told the *Bemidji Pioneer*, "We're being forced to work 12-hour days, six days a week. All of our days off have been canceled by the district manager. They've even gone so far as to say they will not honor sick leave. On top of that, we've been told Amazon is now our

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priority, that Amazon packages are the most important thing we do, the mail is secondary."

Eric Cerroni, whose wife is a rural mail carrier, said, "Mail isn't being delivered on many routes because we're spending 12 hours a day just delivering Amazon packages. If you were to look (in the post office) right now, there's probably five or six routes where mail wasn't delivered yesterday because the packages had to go out."

Mail carriers, who are considered essential workers and are barred by law from striking, are not paid for the actual time it takes them to complete their routes. A route that is evaluated at 8 hours can now take 12 hours.

"Everyone (they hire) quits within a week or two," said Nelson. "They're still struggling after all this time. They didn't learn a dang thing, and they just threw it on us… As incredibly short-staffed as we are, if we can't get the job done every single day they're threatening our jobs. This is all coming from the district manager. It's turned into a very hostile, toxic work environment."

Kentucky school bus drivers launch wave of sickouts over working conditions

In an ongoing complaint beginning back on November 4, nearly 150 bus drivers for the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) in Kentucky called in sick to protest working conditions, leading to the cancellation of school for thousands of students. Jefferson County is heavily urbanized and includes the largest city in the state, Louisville.

The media has focused on a key complaint over student behavior on the bus system. Administrators for JCPS implemented a new procedure by placing the district's "climate and culture staff" at busing compounds where they will directly receive hand-written complaints, called referrals by drivers, concerning students.

But the JCPS passed over complaints about crowded buses and the recent reorganization that has led to long routes for drivers and students alike. And there has been no focus on economic issues for drivers.

The climate and culture staff originated as part of an effort to obscure the primary source of problems inside schools—the deterioration of public education.

Teamsters Local 783, which represents drivers, denied any role in the sickout. Kentucky state law bars public employees from striking or engaging in a work stoppage. The union issued a statement, merely stating, "Some of the drivers felt they weren't being heard when it came to student discipline, overcrowded buses and long hours and felt they had to make a point."

Locked out Rogers Communications telecom technicians in British Columbia to vote on contract

Three hundred technicians, members of the United Steelworkers, who build, maintain and repair internet, phone and television services in Metro Vancouver and the Lower Mainland, will vote this week on a tentative contract. The workers are in the third week of a lockout by Rogers Communications. The company is the largest telecommunications enterprise in Canada. Earlier this year, Shaw Communications, a major player in Western Canada, merged with Rogers. The 300 locked out technicians are former Shaw employees who had been absorbed by Rogers as a result of the merger.

Workers at Rogers have been without a contract since last March. With negotiations for a new contract stalled, workers voted in September by 99.6 percent for a strike. After the late October expiration of a government mandated "cooling-off period," the union issued the required 72-hour strike notice and announced its intention to limit overtime and begin a series of rotating strikes. But before the job actions had begun, management locked out the technicians and within days had activated "contingencies," which consisted of deploying contractors as well as non-union employees to perform the duties of the locked out workers.

The main issue in the contract dispute is key jurisdictional language to protect job security. Workers fear Rogers plans to expand the use of contractors at the expense of unionized jobs. Such practices have been a hallmark of telecommunications companies for decades across North America.

Strike at Vancouver sugar refinery in 7th week

Workers at Rogers Sugar in Vancouver, British Columbia are continuing a strike over contract issues that began September 28. The 138 striking workers are member of Public and Private Workers of Canada Local 8. The Rogers refinery is one of the main sugar producers in Canada and the walkout has led to sugar shortages in western Canada.

In addition to wages and benefits, a major issue is management's demand to institute year-round daily 24/7 operations. As it stands the refiner operates 24 hours daily from Monday through Friday. The union is opposed to the schedule encroaching on weekends.

Currently sugar prices are at their highest levels since 2011 due to harvest shortfalls caused by drought and climate issues. Rogers is continuing some sugar production at the struck facility. The company also operates a sugar refinery in Montreal.

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