

Workers Struggles: The Americas

National strike continues in Panama in the face of government repression; UAW deal blocks strike by marine draftsmen at General Dynamics Electric Boat

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

National strike continues in Panama in the face of government repression

Despite increasing repression against striking workers and their supporters, protests took place across Panama on Friday, including rallies, marches and road blocks. The strikers demand that the government of José Raúl Mulino cancel legislation privatizing Social Security pensions.

The strike, began on April 13, led by the teacher's union, a few days later construction workers and banana workers joined the strike.

Since the strike began, the strikers have raised two new demands: that the open-pit Donoso copper mine, shut down by the Supreme Court following mass protests, now be reopened and that a memorandum of understanding with the United States government, allowing the establishment of US military bases in Panama, be rescinded.

In addition, the strikers demand that demonstrators not be repressed and the release of all those arrested.

March by supporters of Evo Morales is repressed in La Paz, Bolivia

Hundreds of gendarmes surrounded Bolivia's Electoral Court headquarters (TSE) to prevent thousands of marchers, supporters the candidacy of former president Evo Morales, from reaching the building. People had come into La Paz from across the country. The police used tear gas against the demonstrators, forcing the march to change route and rally in nearby Plaza Bolivia square, where they were also attacked with tear gas.

On Thursday, Bolivia's Supreme Constitutional Court (TSC) prohibited Morales from running for a third term, but postponed the decision. The TSE, for now, will allow Morales to be on the ballot, as long as he is represented by a party and depending on further decisions by the TSC. A final decision will be announced on June 6. Morales claims the right to run for another term, as long as the terms are not back-to-back. Presidential elections will take place this August.

Morales, who had been prohibited by the government from entering La Paz on Friday, applauded the protest in social media, calling it a "March to Save Bolivia." Morales had been forced to resign in November 2019

under the threat of a military coup.

Students expel presidential candidates from Chile's University of Valparaiso

Student protesters in the University of Valparaiso [a port-city west of Santiago] chanting "anti-fascists!" interrupted a debate by four pseudo-socialist candidates competing the Unidad Chile coalition primary elections: Carolina Tohá (CP), Jeannette Jara (Party for Democracy), Gonzalo Winter (Broad Front) and Jaime Mullet (Green Party). All the candidates represent the official ruling coalition of President Gabriel Boric. The students blame the current government of Gabriel Boric and the "left" coalition for massive budget cuts and the repression of protests at the University. Thirty programs of study have been cancelled due to budget cuts at Valparaiso.

Students carried signs calling for increased education funding and demanded the resignation of University President Osvaldo Corrales Jorquera.

Last week's protest followed a march on May 7 by 2,000 students through downtown Valparaiso. A wave of student protests is taking place at other public universities in Chile over the same issue.

In all, 11 public universities face total or partial closure in Chile, affecting 60,000 students. So far, the Boric administration's only response is a call for raising educator's teaching loads, in the name of higher efficiency and 'modernization'.

The primary vote is scheduled for July 29.

Last minute deal announced at General Electric Boat in Groton, Connecticut, blocking strike

The United Auto Workers announced Sunday that it had reached a deal with General Dynamics Electric Boat and cancelled a strike that had been set to start Monday by 2,500 marine draftsmen, who design submarines for the US Navy.

According to the UAW both the union and company management were determined to prevent a strike that might disrupt military production for America's expanding wars. In a joint statement UAW Local 571 President William Louis and Shawn Coate, vice president of human resources at the plant, said, "The bargaining committees worked diligently

to find common areas of interest that resulted in wage and benefits enhancements that positively impact employees' quality of life, and achieve fair and equitable results. This package recognizes the essential role of the MDA members in the production of submarines for the U.S. Navy."

While the UAW claimed it had met workers' demands for significant wage increases and cost of living rises, union spokesmen admitted they had made concessions on other key issues. The UAW claimed that it had secured a compounded 30 percent wage increase and improvements on wage progressions over the life of a five-year contract. Full details have not been released and a ratification vote has not yet been scheduled.

Washington state hospital workers strike over wages, benefits and staffing issues

Over 1,000 healthcare workers from two unions launched a five-day strike May 12 against PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center in Bellingham, Washington, over wages, benefits and under-staffing. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199NW represents some 900 medical technicians and service workers while the Union of American Physicians and Dentists (UAPD) comprises another 100 nurse practitioners, physician assistants and nurse midwives who only unionized in 2023.

Pharmacy technician Eva Mohorovich told King 5 news, "Just struggling to pay for food is a real thing. People are struggling with basic necessities. We have people who live in their cars, which is just totally not acceptable. We have a food pantry filled with donations and every day it ends up empty."

The lack of pay equity has enraged workers at the Bellingham facility. It was ranked dead last on this issue among 46 hospitals in Washington state by the non-profit health think tank Lown Institute.

PeaceHealth canceled negotiations after the unions announced their strike intentions on May 1 and has brought in temporary replacement workers. Hospital management declared it would not restart bargaining until after the current strike comes to an end.

Meanwhile, the Washington State Nurses Association (WSNA) is bargaining on behalf of 1,100 nurses at St. Joseph. Nurses voted down a contract offer back in March but the union has not forged a unified struggle with the striking workers. PeaceHealth operates at total of ten medical centers in Alaska, Washington state and Oregon along with 139 clinics.

Southern California beverage strike expands to another six Keurig Dr Pepper facilities

The strike by over 200 beverage workers at the Keurig Dr Pepper (KDP) facility in Victorville, California, expanded May 12 to another six plants and now encompasses over 700 workers. Members of Teamsters Local 896 are angry over safety issues, mandatory overtime, cuts in healthcare and stagnant wages that do not keep up with inflation.

The drivers, warehouse workers, mechanics and production workers at the Victorville plant have an additional beef with the company over management's unilateral cancellation of the sick-time policy. According to Local 896 Secretary-Treasurer Phil Cooper, "KDP was ordered to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars last year after it unlawfully attempted to end its sick-time policy, but these members still haven't seen a dime."

The contract ran out on April 1 and Victorville workers struck May 5. A management spokesperson claimed, "Most of these products are also produced in other locations, and we have contingency plans in place to protect service throughout the work stoppage."

But workers at other KDP plants in Orange, Vernon, Riverside, San Fernando, Thousand Palms and Ventura joined the strike last week. "We're not asking for luxury," twelve-year veteran Maria Gonzales told Breaking Now News. "Just enough to pay rent and put food on the table."

KDP settled a 12-day strike at the company's Ottumwa, Iowa, plant just before the walkout in California for an 8 percent wage increase in the first year of a three-year contract followed by other unspecified increases. The California KDP workers complain that their low wages make it impossible to contribute to the company's 401(k) plan that fails to require regular company contributions. Instead, workers want a guaranteed defined-benefit pension plan.

Alberta civil servants vote to strike

About 23,000 provincial civil servants voted by 90 percent to strike in pursuit of a new contract with a significant wage increase. This year marks the first time the members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) have had the legal right to strike after the anti-strike laws banning public sector job action that had been in place for decades were struck down by the courts as "unconstitutional."

In response to the strike vote, the Alberta government quickly issued their own lockout threat. Should any work stoppage occur, some 6,000 public servants must remain on the job as essential employees.

Theoretically, workers can now strike after giving 72-hours notice. Their strike mandate now remains in effect for the next 120 days. AUPE president Guy Smith announced, however, that the union bureaucracy has no intention of immediately mobilizing its membership for strike action, instead calling on the right-wing government of Premier Danielle Smith to return to the bargaining table. "We are determined to get a deal at the table," he said.

Suffering for years from real-wage cuts, the public servants are demanding a 24 percent wage rise spread over a new four-year contract. The workers' demands follow closely on a contract settlement with provincial nurses that amounted to a 20 percent wage increase for a similar contract term. In the current dispute with the public servants, the government has offered only an 11.5 percent wage increase over four years.

The contract dispute occurs at the same time as 51,000 provincial public school teachers could soon vote on their own strike mandate. In a contract ratification vote that had been recommended by the Alberta Teachers Association, public school teachers voted against a mediated tentative agreement. The defeated contract offered a mere 12 percent general wage increase spread out over four years.

Canadian Hearing Services workers in Ontario enter 4th week on strike

More than 200 translators, facilitators and carers for Canadian Hearing Services, who work with the hearing impaired, are striking for a 5 percent wage increase in a new two-year contract alongside additional increases to their inferior benefits and pension programs as well as "remedy pay." The remedy pay follows on from a three-year wage restraint order from the

provincial Conservative government of Premier Doug Ford that was ruled as unconstitutional by the courts in 2022. Over that time period, inflation in the province spiked by 16 percent.

The strikers are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). All told, the workers' full compensation demand over a proposed two-year contract reaches 30 percent.

Canadian Hearing Services management has offered a paltry-one year contract with a 4.9 percent increase in compensation even as their own CEO last year received a salary bump from \$200,000 to \$340,000 per year.



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