

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Protests continue in Panama against reopening of copper mine and in defense of public education

On June 23, thousands of workers, striking educators, farmers and youth marched in central Panama City against the decision by the administration of Panamanian President Jose Raul Mulino to accelerate its attacks on education and to reopen the very large copper open-pit mine, which protesters say poses a severe threat to water sources. The mine—operated by First Quantum Minerals, a Canadian firm—was closed in 2023 after mass protests against environmental contamination.

This was the latest, and one of the largest, in a series of “Protest in White” that began in May following a government decree allowing the re-initiation of the processing of already extracted minerals as the first step in reopening the mine in Northern Panama.

The protesters link the reopening of the mine to the atmosphere of corruption and nepotism that have become the norm in the Mulino administration and to the cuts in education, which include attacks on public school teachers and non-payment of back wages.

Colombian workers protest election of Abelardo de la Espriella

On the evening of June 21 workers in several areas of Bogota launched spontaneous marches and rallies in defense of democracy and against the right-wing, fascist candidate Abelardo de la Espriella, who claimed victory in the country’s presidential contest, while the counting was still taking place. Three days later Espriella was officially declared the winner with a 1 percent vote margin.

Throughout the evening, angry demonstrators blocked city streets and avenues.

The Colombian United Workers Federation (CUT)

denounced the election of Abelardo de la Espriella but made no proposals to mobilize teachers and other workers in collective strike action to prevent Espriella’s ascension to power.

“The CUT stands in opposition to the fascist neo-liberal government of Abelardo de la Espriella” declared Colombia’s main trade union apparatus. CUT officials said Espriella’s attacks on the Education Union (FECODE) were retaliation for the financial support the union gave his opponent in the elections. Espriella demands “keeping FECODE away from the classrooms” and “introducing God” into the schools.

Protests against Honduras government’s handout of small farms

Warning that the legal status of Indian lands and small farms is endangered by new legislation, demonstrators belonging to 217 organizations (including farmers, peasants, Indians and human rights activists) rallied on June 23 to present a habeas corpus demand at the Supreme Court in Tegucigalpa to stop the imposition of recently passed repressive legislation. The so-called Law to Strengthen the Agro-Industrial Sector and Energy Projects restricts the rights of rural workers and indigenous people to protest.

Alongside the protest at the Supreme Court, across Honduras a number of marches, rallies and road blockages took place in the northern part of the country. Carlos Lopez, a rural leader, warned that the dispossession of lands will accelerate the food crisis that is affecting many rural families: “We are people, hungry and in need. It is time that we had a government that gives us support, instead of continuing attacks,” declared Lopez. “Enough already! We have been robbed enough!”

Utility workers to walk out July 4 unless management accedes to workers’ demands

The union covering 1,600 gas and electric field workers, mechanics and call center employees for the power company PECO (Philadelphia Electric Company) announced at a June 25

rally in Philadelphia's Washington Square that the union would strike July 4 if an agreement is not reached. Larry Anastasi, president of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 614, said the union had "exhausted every avenue to reach a deal."

Workers charge that their pay is 30 percent less than utility workers at other companies. They are also seeking improved benefits and healthcare options. In particular, workers want an end to the two-tier retirement scheme under which workers hired after 2021 have no pensions and other workers have inferior pension benefits.

The old five-year contract expired March 31. Workers voted at the end of May to authorize strike action. A single negotiating session is set for July 2 between the two sides. A walkout would represent the first strike in the company's 145-year history.

PECO operates in southeastern Pennsylvania and provides electricity to about 1.6 million customers and natural gas to over 511,000 customers.

Pennsylvania hospital workers angered by contract offer

The 950 hospital workers at Mount Nittany Medical Center in State College, Pennsylvania, reacted negatively to a June 22 proposal by hospital management that essentially results in a drastic wage cut given the rising cost of living. The proposal contained a 0 percent increase in year one followed by 1 percent increases in years two and three.

Fawn Guignet, who works in the emergency department, told WPSU the offer was "pretty shocking. We weren't really expecting that."

Kelsye Stott-Fleissner, a registered respiratory therapist and the vice president of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) chapter at the hospital, added, "Our cost-of-living raises in the last contract or so have not matched with what the actual cost of living is. You can really see that in terms of the fact that a vast majority of our healthcare workers within the facility don't actually live in Centre County, because it's almost too expensive to do so."

Besides pay, workers also want increased benefits and are emphasizing workplace safety with a view to retaining hospital staff. The union said the hospital has a 33 percent profit margin.

At the same time, Mount Nittany has sued the federal government for canceling its status as a "sole community hospital." The designation is applied by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to facilities in isolated areas to ensure access by those populations to medical care. Among the benefits is higher Medicare payments than the normal standard.

Montreal Metro grocery workers continue strike despite deployment of scab labour

Some 550 fruit and vegetable warehouse workers and truck drivers are continuing their strike, now entering its fourth month, with management at Metro Inc. bringing in scab labour. The strike has caused sales at the grocery chain to decline by 1.5 percent.

Last month, provincial labour investigators confirmed a complaint that Metro management was employing replacement workers to cover the jobs of the strikers. Although there is anti-scab legislation in Quebec, management has continued with its "contingency plans" to keep a steady supply of fruits and vegetables in its 300 stores across the province.

On June 18, the workers, members of the Fédération du commerce- Confédération des syndicats nationaux (FC-CSN), the province's second-largest union federation, voted by 96 percent to reject a miserable contract offer. The workers are demanding a wage increase to make up for years of inflation-eroded compensation. They are fighting for a 20 percent raise in the first year of a new contract, followed by 5 percent raises in each of the two subsequent years.

Niagara Falls steelworkers begin strike

Last week, 46 members of the United Steelworkers (USW) at Salit Steel walked off the job after voting by 91 percent to reject the company's contract proposal. The workers are fighting to protect wages, pensions, benefits and negotiated workplace rights as management attempts to foist a concessions-laden deal on the workforce. The strikers are fighting not only for themselves but also to protect the collective agreement standards for workers at the company's other unionized locations in Welland and Burlington, Ontario.



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