

Ecuador unions shut down strike by Walmart workers; United Airline flight attendants to vote on strike authorization

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

Railroad workers, health workers, teachers, students and public employees mobilized on July 19, going from station to station with “Save our trains” petitions against the impending privatization of public rail transit by the Milei administration. In Buenos Aires thousands use the train every day to commute to their jobs and schools.

Argentine teachers and transit workers have also initiated a petition campaign against privatization of commuter rail system.

A privatized urban rail system, run for profit will increase fares, reduce service and cause layoffs. Friday’s campaign is part of an on-going labor effort for workers against the Milei administration’s anti-worker measures.

Unions representing 11,400 striking workers against three supermarket chains owned by Walmart Corporation, abruptly shut down the strike after six days, settling for the existing contract following the collapse of government mediations and with Walmart insisting that their best last offer would not change. Strikers were only told that the unions plan to renew negotiations in 18 months.

Workers will continue to work under the previous contract mandating substandard wages, multiple assignments at management’s whim, and arbitrary layoffs.

On Thursday July 18 teachers marched and rallied in downtown Quito protesting President Daniel Noboa’s cancellation of fuel subsidies, part of his austerity measures, that have caused an increase in the price of gasoline and other fuels, which, in turn, is causing prices of food and other essential goods to increase throughout Ecuador, exacerbating social and economic inequalities. The demonstrators were confronted by police and there were several arrests.

The July increase in fuel prices is part of a step-by-step policy. The next increase is set for August 1.

Chanting “Out with all the corrupt exploiters!” (Que se vayan los corruptos y explotadores), workers and students mobilized and

rallied in Lima on Friday July 19th for the removal of President Dina Boluarte and the national legislature. In addition to an end to government corruption, the demonstrators demanded wage and pension increases.

The protests have intensified in Peru following the death of 26 people from a bus accident in the mountainous Huancavelica region, blamed on poorly maintained highways.

The Secretary of the Peruvian Central Trade Union Federation addressed the crowd and pointed out that both the Congress and the president are rejected by the vast majority of the population.

United States

The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) announced July 16 that they will go ahead with a strike authorization vote for 28,000 of its members at United Airlines charging that they “can’t afford to wait for improvements.” The balloting will start August 1 and end on August 28.

Flight attendants have been demanding improved pay and working conditions since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Last year the union filed for federal mediation. Workers are seeking a double-digit base pay increase, retroactive pay and flexibility in scheduling.

A major sore spot with flight attendants is the fact that United CEO Scott Kirby’s annual pay in 2023 amounted to \$19 million while AFA members have gone without a raise since 2020.

Flight attendants are barred by law from immediately striking under the Railway Labor Act, legislation specifically aimed to frustrate and undermine workers. First, the National Mediation Board has to determine an impasse and release the union from negotiations. Then follows a 30-day cooling-off period before the AFA can legally strike.

The 4,000 nurses at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts, will carry out a strike authorization vote on July 24 after 10 months of failed negotiations to deliver an acceptable contract for members of the Massachusetts Nursing Association (MNA). Nurses are seeking improved staffing levels, competitive wages and better health insurance options.

The old contract expired back on September 30, 2023, and the

MNA and management have held 28 bargaining sessions since then. In early May, a federal mediator joined negotiations.

Kelly Morgan, a nurse and chair of the MNA at Brigham and Women's said in a press release, "MGB (Mass General Brigham) executives have forced the hand of Brigham nurses by taking advantage of our dedication to our patients. We care for extremely sick and injured patients without the right equipment, in crowded hallways, through mold and insect infestations, and under the constant threat of violence. Yet these executives—who pay themselves handsomely—refuse to respect Brigham nurses enough to settle a fair contract."

Brigham and Women's Hospital made \$108.7 million during the last fiscal year. Its CEO, Anne Klibanski got a 25 percent hike in pay back in 2020-21, raising her salary to over \$5 million.

Canada

Locked-out dockworkers at the Port of Quebec rallied last week to draw attention to continuing privations suffered during their 22-month lockout. Last month their employer, the Societe des arimeurs de Quebec, reaffirmed their insistence that the workers must accept a grueling mandatory overtime work schedule.

Over the course of the dispute, the 81 longshore workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have been hit by truckers running the picket line, watched scabs perform their work and witnessed multimillion-dollar industrial accidents at the port caused by the unqualified replacement workers. Cargoes have also been re-routed to other ports in Montreal and Halifax where port unions have refused to mobilize their members to spurn those shipments.

Almost two years ago the union was moving into a legal strike position beginning on September 11 but did not call out its members, leaving the initiative for a lockout in the hands of management. That lockout was then imposed on September 15, 2022. Alongside demanding a wage rise that defends their living standards against the current and projected inflationary spike, workers were also opposing the employer's demand that they accept a grueling and unsafe 12-hour shift schedule.

The struggle at the Port of Quebec docks follows on the heels of major battles at the Port of Montreal over grueling work schedules, a vicious disciplinary procedure, unsafe working conditions and speedup. With the connivance of the CUPE leadership, Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government criminalized a strike by the 1,150 Montreal longshoremen after just four days, in April 2021. A militant strike by over 7,000 British Columbia dockworkers, members of the International Longshore Workers Union, in 2023 met a similar fate when, under threats of government strike-breaking legislation, a 13-day strike was shut down and an inferior contract imposed through federal mediation.

Over 9,000 provincial healthcare workers, whose contracts expired in October of 2023, continue to see their right to strike stymied by the Conservative government of Premier Tim Houston.

These healthcare professionals range from 174 separate occupations including diagnostic imaging operators, pharmacists, therapists, paramedics, mental health and community councilors and laboratory workers.

The workers are organized in three unions, Unifor, CUPE and the Nova Scotia Government Employees Union. Many of these members are amongst the lowest paid in Atlantic Canada and see their working conditions steadily deteriorating due to acute staffing shortages.

According to legislation passed by the previous Liberal provincial government, an essential services agreement is required to be settled before any movement toward a strike can take place. The legislation also provides ample opportunity for the government to seek to weaken any possible job action by designating as many workers as they can as "essential" and not allowed to strike.

In the current contract dispute, the government has met with union leaders 13 times and has yet to produce their version of who would be designated as essential, which would then be negotiated further with the unions. This "slow walking" has been so egregious that the unions have now applied for a labour mediator to assist in moving the process forward.

The delay imposed by the essential services legislation is just one of many such anti-worker strictures that litter the labour relations/collective bargaining systems across Canada (and internationally). These include not only restrictive essential service provisions but also rules to force endless months of "conciliation," binding arbitrations, "cooling off" periods, picket limitations, court injunctions, lockouts and the mobilization of scabs. When all else fails, there is always the option to employ back-to-work legislation against critical sections of the workforce and fines and imprisonment for those who defy the order. Such is the character of the so-called free collective bargaining systems that the unions are so closely integrated into.



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