

17,000 Walmart workers strike in Chile

By Andrea Lobo
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More than 17,000 workers at Walmart Chile began the largest private-sector strike in the country's history Wednesday.

The walkout is in response to mass firings and the expansion of a “multifunctional” work regime for the remaining workers. A total of 124 of the company's stores will be closed indefinitely, while intermittent strike action will take place in the other 276.

The introduction of automated cashiers and other equipment by Walmart has already left at least 2,000 families in Chile this year without a living, while delivering major profits for the company's wealthy investors. With the thuggery that characterizes the American financial and corporate aristocracy, the company immediately and openly offered “a major contribution to the union for the investment in the training of its associates.”

This bought the company a temporary reprieve. Since June 25-27, workers had voted overwhelmingly—91.75 percent—to strike, but the Inter-company Leader Union (SIL) agreed to prolong the legally mandated five-day “conciliation period” until the strike began yesterday.

Amid growing outrage among workers, with many online charging that the union would “keep all the money,” the president of the SIL, Juan Moreno, felt compelled to initiate the strike and note, “when we speak of training, it has to guarantee actual employment,” on top of the union's demand for a meager 4 percent raise.

Despite the enormous support for the strike, the workers' chief concern is the role of the union, which is seen as subservient to the company. The SIL had already cancelled a strike after a similar vote in 2017 and imposed a miserable 7 percent raise over two years.

Workers have also correctly expressed little to no trust that the union will prevent retaliation from a company that infamously hands its managers US-written scripts for the summary firings of strikers that begin, “Thank you for visiting with us.”

Marco, a warehouse worker who spoke with the WWSWS, noted that he distrusts the intentions of Juan Moreno and the union because he thinks that they “have political interests in mind.”

Lorena, a former Walmart worker in the center-south province of Bío Bío, told the WWSWS that she had to quit six months ago after falling ill and receiving no compensation or help from the union. “I'll only tell you this: the company as much as the union disappointed me. I lost almost five years of my life,” she said.

These are concerns and experiences shared by countless workers on social media, some of whom charged Moreno with only seeking to rise up the hierarchy of the Stalinist Communist Party-led Chilean Workers' Union Central (CUT), to which the SIL belongs. Several other workers charged that Moreno makes 4 million pesos (US\$5,847) monthly, a figure that couldn't be confirmed independently but would place him comfortably in the top 1 percent in Chile.

Walmart is the largest private employer and the largest company by revenue on the planet. Operating 11,368 stores in 27 countries, Walmart has 2.3 million employees—1.5 million in the US alone—and had a record revenue last year of US\$500 billion. This figure compares to Chile's annual GDP of US\$298 billion and is nearly 10 times its tax revenue.

The Walton family, heirs of the multinational, have a net worth of \$175 billion, according to a February report by Bloomberg that found that the company had made \$14 billion dollars in profit since the beginning of the year. This is the result of an increasingly aggressive quest for cash by finance capital that seeks to extract profits by further destroying the living standards of workers everywhere.

Anthony, who works at a Walmart supermarket named Acuenta in southern Chile, described to the WWSWS the labor conditions of “multifunctionality” that are being imposed under the threat of firings. “A worker who is a cashier is taken from her post to work in restocking on the floor, picking up boxes of products, working under pressure because of the lack of existing personnel. Many young workers end up asking for leave due to stress.

“The people assigned to cleaning have to work as cashiers and leave the cleaning undone, being forced to cover areas without personnel. Sometimes the store and the bathrooms are left in unusable conditions.

“Workers have to move shopping carts from the parking lots, to clean the floor because there is no cleaning personnel, which goes against the law. There are currently three workers with medical leaves due to stress and back and muscle injuries from overwork. The appropriate clothing is not offered, and we have to buy it ourselves in order not to get sick from the cold.”

Among other conditions, Anthony said that “the half hour for shift changes doesn’t even finish and they are already calling on the speaker for workers to be in their place. We have to eat in a rush since there is only one person in charge of the cafeteria and sometimes there is a line of workers waiting for food.”

He explained, “Of course, what happens is that the firings in the stores force those left to do twice or three times the work. The worst thing is that if you don’t do what they ask, they threaten to fire you. In terms of the negotiation, we get WhatsApp messages on some results with empty warranties...”

“I’ve been working there for almost one year and lately with the firings and little personnel things, the stores are in chaos because of the influx of customers. Sadly, it seems Walmart is only interested in numbers and not much in the workers. Being an international company with so much money, their workers should have excellent conditions. Where I live, it’s a small town, but daily profits surpass 10 million pesos [\$14,575].”

His monthly income is 360,000 pesos (\$525). “It’s not enough,” he says, “for light bills, water, rent, food; I have an eight-year-old daughter on top of the bus passes.” The median salary in the commercial sector is 300,000 pesos (\$437), while the official poverty line for a household in 2012, which has not been updated since, was 368,000 pesos (\$536).

When the interviewer pointed out that conditions of Walmart employees and workers internationally are the same, Anthony said: “That is right...the struggle must be one because Walmart is a huge company. ... At every company, all the money that they make is only thanks to the workers, and a worker needs good pay to be able to work at least without having to worry about costs that he will not be able to afford at the end of the month!”

The Walmart workers have walked out as 80,000 teachers are continuing a six-week strike across Chile. On Wednesday, the union Colegio de Profesores (CdP—Teachers’ Association) had striking teachers vote on the same rotten contract that they had rejected a week earlier, while pleading with them to “end the strike.” Last month, the unions at the state-owned Chuquicamata mine sent about 6,000 workers back to work after a 14-day fruitless strike using the same strategy as the CdP.

Workers at Walmart face the same fate if their strike remains isolated from the growing resurgence of militancy in the working class in Chile and internationally.

As one of the most exploited layers of the working class, grocery workers internationally are standing up in larger numbers. Last week, 10,000 workers at several supermarket chains in Portland, Oregon, voted in favor of a strike, while another 31,000 Stop & Shop workers struck in April in New England. Among Walmart workers across the US, there is growing anger toward the company.

Antonia, with 10 years’ experience at Walmart in the US described to *Eater* that due to cuts in personnel she is ordered to unload 11 pallets by herself. She explained: “I have three kids and I have to take whatever I have. Almost everybody, if they pay the rent, they don’t have money to buy groceries. If they have car problems, they have to borrow money from everybody.”

The globalization of production, finance and distribution since the 1990s has resulted in an enormous concentration of wealth by a handful of oligarchs in every country, but it has also merged the standard of living and levels of exploitation of workers across the world, increasingly by the same employers.

The global character of the class struggle constitutes the single greatest advantage for workers, especially in a time of Internet, social media and smartphones, to fight against the continued attacks against their social rights by the ruling financial aristocracy.

However, this objective unity must be organized consciously and independently of every nationalist and pro-capitalist organization and party, including the trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists and operators.

The crucial and immediate task for Walmart workers, teachers, miners and every sector entering struggle in Chile and internationally is to democratically elect rank-and-file committees to take each of these struggles into their own hands, to formulate both (1) their own demands, which must include workers’ control over the workplace, and (2) the path to win them, including an immediate appeal to mobilize the most powerful social force on the planet, their working-class brothers and sisters internationally.

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