

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

## Teachers in Argentina vote for limited strike actions

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Latin America

### Teachers in Argentina vote for limited strike actions this week

Various teachers unions and federations in Argentina held votes on planned strikes ranging from 24 to 48 hours. The Education Workers Confederation (CTERA) voted September 4 to strike nationally for 24 hours on September 13. The CTERA stoppage was also approved by the SADOP private school teachers union, as well as the CONADU university professors union.

Five teachers unions in the province of Buenos Aires, which make up the United Buenos Aires Teachers Front (FUDB), will hold a 48-hour strike on September 12 and 13. FUDB has asked the rightwing provincial governor María Eugenia Vidal to declare a state of emergency for the schools to “guarantee the right to education with safe schools and an urgent salary raise that implies consolidation of salaries.”

Members of the SUTEBa and FEB unions, also based in the province, had voted for a 96-hour walkout, which would have been the longest in a series of limited strikes, but the leadership cut that in half. The Education Workers Union in the city of Buenos Aires ratified a 48-hour strike for September 13 and 14.

A march to the National Congress will take place during the strikes under the slogan “Public education is in danger.” Demands will include restarting of parity talks, a salary raise formula (with a “trigger clause”) to outstrip inflation, more investment in personnel and infrastructure, rejection of the recently signed International Monetary Fund loan and others.

### Guyanese teachers union ends nine-day strike over salaries

On September 7, K-12 teachers in Guyana returned to their classrooms following nine days out on strike over a salary dispute between the Guyana Teachers Union (GTU) and the Ministry of Education (MoE). After fruitless negotiations followed by an equally useless “conciliation process,” the GTU called the strike to pressure the MoE to take the issue to an arbitration panel.

The MoE and the GTU had failed to reach an agreement on raises covering 2016 to 2020. Union negotiators had demanded a 40 percent raise for 2016 and 5 percent for the next four years, while the MoE offered GY\$700 million (US\$3.35 million) for raises and GY\$200 million (US\$958 thousand) for some salary scales. For the 10,615 teachers that averages less than GY\$85,000, (US\$407) each over a year.

When the dispute was brought to the conciliation hearing before Junior

Labour Minister Keith Scott, he urged the union to take the MoE offer and called the teachers, who are facing rising living expenses, “selfish and uncaring.” The GTU then called for an arbitration panel, which would supposedly be less biased.

The MoE put a contingency plan in place, bringing in trainees, retirees and retired teachers to scab on the striking teachers. The teachers held several protests—1,000 attending in Linden—and parents in some towns also protested in support of the teachers.

Eventually, after a meeting in the Department of Labour, the MoE and GTU agreed to the arbitration panel, and the teachers were called back to their classrooms. GTU president Mark Lyte, after the usual rhetoric about “solidarity” and “determination,” told teachers that the issue was “out of the hands of the GTU, and out of the hands of the government, and into the hands of the three arbitrators, they will look at cost of living and every other thing to determine what is a livable wage for teachers.” The panelists will be chosen at a later date.

### Strike by Colombian port workers over long shifts, poor pay and conditions

About 300 port workers in Colombia’s main Pacific Ocean port city Buenaventura began a strike September 5 over a list of unaddressed grievances. The striking workers have gathered each day at the entrance to the TCBuen firm’s container terminal to press their demands.

The workers often work 12-hour shifts, and they complain that they get neither overtime pay nor decent food during the prolonged shifts. They also are demanding allowances for vacations and years of service, among other demands.

TCBuen director Nestor Amador claims that the company has made offers that surpass industry standards, and that management is open to dialogue. However, the national president of the port workers union, Esteban Barbosa, told reporters, “The negotiation is paralyzed, we are willing, we are open to dialogue, there are four high-level Labor Ministry functionaries and nothing has happened.”

On the third day of the walkout, Barbosa told reporters that the walkout had “shown the indifference of the directors” of TCBuen and added that “the Labor Ministry functionaries have left; it’s false that they [management] want to negotiate.” According to the union, 25 workers have been fired in the last year and eleven of them were unionized.

### Jamaican transport workers strike over pay parity and other issues

Drivers, conductors and mechanics for the Montego Bay Metro

Company in St. James, Jamaica showed up in front of the firm's compound in the early hours of September 3. The protesting workers carried placards expressing their complaints and vowed that they would not return to work until they were addressed.

Workers complain that Metro, a division of the island nation's Ministry of Transport and Mining, is given short shrift compared to the Jamaican Urban Transport Company (JUTC), also part of the Ministry. The result is poor pay, lack of health insurance and lack of adequate uniforms for Montego Bay Metro workers. In addition, they say that the Ministry's neglect of the vehicles make them dangerous for the children whom they transport to school daily.

On September 5, the striking workers returned to the job after the Transport Ministry and the National Workers Union assured them that the issues were being addressed and that they would be paid in parity with JUTC workers. However, with no communication from management on any of the issues, the workers resumed their pickets and strike the next day.

The United States

### **Seattle operating engineers strike shut down**

The International Union of Operating Engineers has ordered striking workers back on the jobs after announcing a tentative deal with the Associated General Contractors of Washington. The strike had impacted operations at hundreds of construction projects in western Washington state.

The strike shut down most of the 65 cranes operating in Seattle, which is undergoing a construction boom. The deal reportedly includes a 17.8 percent pay and benefit increase over three years, compared to the 15 percent raise previously offered. The walkout began August 21 and lasted 17 days.

The contract also provides for \$1.25 premium pay for workers in downtown Seattle, where the cost of living is higher.

### **University of Michigan Health System nurses vote on strike**

Nurses at the University of Michigan Health System in Ann Arbor are voting this week on strike authorization. The nearly 6,000 nurses, members of the Michigan Nurses Association, have been without a contract since June 20.

One of the main outstanding issues is the question of staffing levels. The University has reportedly refused to bargain over enforceable nurse-to-patient ratios. Meanwhile, the university has offered a minimal 3-4 percent across-the-board pay increase over the next three years, shift differentials and limits on mandatory overtime.

According to the MNA the last management offer would cut retirement benefits by eliminating contributions for overtime, holidays and shift differentials and set up a two-tier wage structure based on geographic location.

MNA says any walkout will be preceded by a 10-day strike notice and be over unfair labor practices. Public employee strikes are illegal in Michigan.

### **Lockout halts some Michigan road projects**

Work at dozens of road projects in southeast Michigan halted last week after a contractors association locked out operating engineers involved in a contract dispute.

Details of the dispute are sketchy, but the contractors association accuses the union of disruptive behavior. The Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association and Operating Engineers Local 324 have been in talks since June over a new contract. The MITA says the union has refused to negotiate with the association and instead has sought to forge separate deals with individual employers.

The MITA said it had offered an across-the-board three percent raise over the course of a five-year contract, a derisory amount, far below inflation. The union said it was taken by surprise by the lockout, which will impact hundreds of unionized construction workers.

### **Ohio Valley Kroger workers reject contract offer, authorize strike**

Some 1,200 Kroger workers voted down a proposed contract agreement over the weekend by a 3-1 margin. The workers then voted to re-authorize strike action. The contract for the workers in eastern Ohio and Northern West Virginia expired August 4 and a contract extension is set to expire September 14. Workers also rejected a previous management offer.

The United Food and Commercial Workers did not reveal details of Kroger's contract offer, but said proposed wage increases did not offset rising health care costs. The negotiating committee gave a "neutral recommendation" on the offer. The union has not set a strike date.

Canada

### **Ottawa, Montreal newspaper workers facing strike/lockout**

Over 120 newspaper workers at Postmedia publications in Ottawa and Montreal could be on strike or lockout this week depending on the outcome of voting early in the week on the company's "final" contract offer.

The workers affected are members of the Communication Workers Association of America and Canada (CWA) at the *Ottawa Citizen*, the *Ottawa Sun* and the *Montreal Gazette*. Postmedia has said that if the Ottawa vote goes against their offer they will lock workers out and their counterparts in Montreal have said they will go out on strike in solidarity if that happens.

The last contract expired almost three years ago and union negotiators say that even after they have been without a pay raise for six years Postmedia is asking for more, particularly in the areas of pensions, health benefits and sick leave. The company has said that in addition to locking out workers they will consider further measures such as permanent job cuts in the event of a contract rejection.

Quebec liquor store workers continue job actions

In the third of six such planned actions, workers at Quebec's liquor board, the Société des alcools du Québec (SAQ), were off the job last Sunday and did not return to work until Tuesday.

After working without a contract since 2017, 5,500 workers at 400 SAQ outlets across the province, who are members of the Syndicat des employé(e)s de magasins et de bureaux de la SAQ (SEMB SAQ), voted overwhelmingly in favor of strike action earlier this year. Though most of the 400 SAQ outlets in the province were closed by the action, around 60 remained open and staffed by management.

With weekend work hours and job security being among the main

obstacles to a new contract, demonstrations have been held across the province as part of the union's campaign to pressure the SAQ for a contract settlement.



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