

Workers Struggles: The Americas

Argentine teachers protest and strike over night school closures

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Latin America

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Teachers and supporters in Buenos Aires held a march from the Legislature to the Ministry of Education on December 26. The mobilization, called by the Education Workers Union (UTE) and the Ademys Educators Association, was convoked to demand the repeal of Resolution 4055, which was published in the Ministry's official bulletin December 14 and orders the closure of 14 night schools. The schools offer classes for young students—the majority under 18 years old—who work during the day to help support themselves and their families.

On December 27, the teachers held a 24-hour strike and again marched to the Ministry building, where they held a vigil. Teachers denounced efforts by the government to replace classroom instruction with online courses, “because they don’t have and they need study habits, an embrace, support and an attentive ear,” one protesting teacher told reporters.

At a press conference, UTE officials denounced the resolution and threatened that if the resolution was not reversed, “teachers will not begin the 2019 academic cycle.”

Taxi drivers in Buenos Aires protest changes to work requirements

Taxi drivers blocked selected streets in Buenos Aires December 27 to protest changes that the city government claims will modernize the service. The main changes—the result of legislation passed December 6—are the requirement to replace meters with tablets and the installation of apps. The cabbies assert that the measures will add to their expenses, the tablets costing around 1,800 pesos (US\$48) extra per month.

Argentine aviation workers protest attacks on security,

conditions

Members of the AAA aviation workers' union held a protest in front of Argentina's Transport Ministry December 27. The action was held in the context of the government's imposition of “obligatory conciliation” talks following a recent one-day strike.

The aim of the demonstration was to denounce the policies of the right-wing Cambiemos coalition headed by President Mauricio Macri. These include undercutting of job security, attacks on wages, encouragement of low-cost (and lower-paying) airlines to the detriment of flagship airline Aerolíneas Argentinas, and toleration of firings and anti-union actions by airline management.

Unions in other sectors joined the AAA, including maritime, toll booth, port, transportation and road construction.

Bolivian doctors to hold two-day strike against government health care system

At a December 27 meeting in the city of Santa Cruz, members of the Medical College of Bolivia resolved to go on nationwide strike for two days, January 3 and 4, to protest the application of the Unique Health System (SUS), which was ratified that day by the legislature and is scheduled to go into effect this month.

The SUS has been promoted as a universal health insurance plan, but the doctors' unions claim that conditions do not exist for applying it. They point to the lack of equipment, infrastructure, and supplies as among the reasons that the SUS will not be viable. A member of the Simes doctors' union claimed that the government's prioritization of “the construction of palaces, ministries, museums or the purchase of airplanes” in the last 13 years has drained resources.

A meeting that was supposed to take place between the Medical College and government representatives failed to materialize, leading to the strike vote. Emergency and other critical services will remain in force in the public health system during the strike.

Antiguan broadcast workers strike over multiple issues

Staff at Antigua and Barbuda's ABS TV/Radio went on strike December 21 over a number of outstanding issues. Their colleagues in the informational technology department joined them later. As of December 27, they were still out.

The list of their complaints includes: low morale; poor communication from management; inconsistencies in scheduling, operational procedures and standards; need for infrastructure improvements, e.g., lighting, bathroom and air conditioning; low salaries; and unpaid overtime.

The general manager of the station has requested the intervention of the Labour Commission, and has asked the workers to return, but they have remained out. Their union, the Antigua Trades and Labour Union began talks with management December 28.

The United States

National Grid lockout continues into New Year

Some 1,250 gas workers at National Grid in Massachusetts remain on the picket line after being locked out by their employer. The United Steelworkers (USW) had issued a statement declaring its intention to reach a contract settlement by December 28, but the deadline passed without an agreement.

National Grid has used strikebreakers to maintain its operation since the beginning of the lockout six months ago. The company has cancelled the workers' health insurance, forcing them to seek their own coverage. A central issue in dispute is the retention of pensions for new hires as well as an inadequate pay offer.

The USW has centered its efforts on lobbying the state's Democratic and Republican politicians rather than mobilizing the working class. In a gesture to the union bureaucracy, Massachusetts Republican Governor Charlie Baker signed legislation this week extending unemployment benefits for the locked-out workers for another 26 weeks.

Operator of car washes in New Jersey and New York compelled to pay back wages

Some 100 workers at four car washes in New Jersey and New York received back wages December 20 totaling \$5 million after a court fight that began years ago at the Elizabeth, New Jersey, car wash leased by Jose Vazquez, where workers were paid under the minimum wage for decades. The workers were both documented and undocumented and came from Mexico, Central America and the Dominican Republic.

The 18 New Jersey workers were paid an average of \$3.50 to \$4.00 an hour working 12-hour shifts. If business lagged, they might only make \$5 or \$10 for the day.

Vazquez attempted what many employers of car washes, restaurants and other small businesses that super-exploit immigrant workers do by executing a bankruptcy in order to transfer assets

and avoid the wage settlement. But investigators found Vazquez was hiding \$1.2 million in a safe in his house and held another \$20 million in real estate. He also owned outright another three car washes in New York with another 88 workers similarly exploited who were joined to the suit.

Back in November, two car washes in Los Angeles, where workers were paid an average \$4.50 an hour, settled a case for \$1 million. Earlier in July, another owner of several car washes was fined \$4.2 million after cheating hundreds of workers.

In most cases, though, workers who fight for years in the courts find that owners sell off their businesses, sometimes to relatives, and then declare bankruptcy in order to escape wage settlements. A 2015 report calculated that from 2003 to 2013, New York State's Department of Labor failed to collect some \$101 million in wages owed to workers. In the spring of 2017, West Virginia state legislators passed a law that removed a wage bond requirement for the construction and mining industries that would open the way for these companies to escape back-wage settlements.

Canada

Strike vote by Montreal longshore workers

Longshoremen at Canada's second largest port returned an overwhelming 99.5 percent strike authorization vote, according to the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

The contract for some 1,100 workers in the port of Montreal expired in December. CUPE is in talks with the Maritime Employers Association (MEA) with little progress reported. No strike deadline has been set, however.

Workers are angry over oppressive conditions. Since 2013, some 30 workers have been fired and 1,000 suspension days have been levied. Under current rules, longshoremen are required to work 19 days in every 21-day period. Wages are also in dispute.

The previous contract expired in 2012. A new agreement was ratified over significant opposition, with only 56 percent of workers voting in favor of a six-year deal providing for an overall 12 percent pay increase.



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