Kitchener-Waterloo bus strike enters second week in Canada

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Steelworkers' slowdown in Argentina

Workers at the Zapla steel plant in the city of Palpalá in northwestern Argentina went on a total slowdown on January 24 over lack of clean water at the plant and back wages arrears that Zapla management is refusing to pay, in violation an agreement in which the company agreed to pay owed wages in installments. The workers are owed the entire salary increase negotiated in 2019 (to make up for inflation), plus a payment of $5,000, decreed by the government in October 2019.

Last November workers addressed a letter to the United Metal Workers (UOMRA), denouncing the conditions that they face. Zapla, originally a state-owned company, was privatized in 1999. The workers' letter details that since then there has been a steady attack and erosion of jobs and working conditions. Employment at the plant has fallen from 1,250 workers to 200 (in 1991 the plant had 8,000 workers). The UOMRA has been complicit in these attacks.

Zapla has not addressed the issue of contaminated water, for drinking and hygiene, an issue that arose several days prior to the protest strike and which has progressively gotten worse. "We have been without potable water; it flows through a contaminated pipe," declared a spokesman for the strikers.

Workers are reporting to their stations at the plant but performing no work.

Workers occupy flour mill in Córdoba, Argentina

On January 23, workers occupying the Molinos Minetti flour mill in Córdoba, Argentina, fought off police attempts to expel them from the mill, which is in bankruptcy and being liquidated. The workers are demanding the immediate reopening of the plant, along with payment of owed back wages. The 150 workers at the plant have not been paid in six months and are dependent on the solidarity of their neighbors and workers at other plants. Workers had been advised by provincial authorities and their own union to have patience and accept whatever compensation results from the bankruptcy. Plant employees point out that within the plant there is sufficient stock to pay all that is owed to them.

On Tuesday, police had locked the entrances to the plant, locking workers in and preventing others from entering, in preparation for its evacuation.

The next day, scores of workingmen and women from the area neighboring the plant, plus students and youth, fought police surrounding the plant and forced their way in and reoccupied the plant. At the plant workers have voted to continue the occupation until the plant reopens and they are paid their back wages.

Mexico: University of Monterrey instructors on strike

Instructors at the Technical University of Monterrey, in Monterrey, Mexico, went on strike on January 24 demanding higher wages and better working conditions and that university authorities recognize their

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independent union. The strikers, joined by students, blocked access to campus buildings and confronted police, called in by the university.

Unhappy with the official unions, the instructors organized their own union, which is not recognized by the university.

Many of the striking educators are contingent workers, hired in six-month stints with no benefits and no health coverage, and paid hunger salaries. They point out that those who complain are victimized and not rehired.

New Jersey warehouse workers strike against IKEA

Warehouse workers at IKEA's distribution center in Westampton, New Jersey began picketing January 20 after voting down the Netherlands-based company's last, best and final offer two days earlier. The 187 members of the International Association of Machinists are demanding higher pay and oppose the slow incremental wage escalators that require workers to work more than 15 years to reach the highest wage category.

Currently, new hires make a meager $13.35 an hour starting wage, which is even less than the $15 that Amazon pays at its new fulfillment center in nearby Burlington City. Workers also want a hike in the maximum pay of $24.46 an hour.

IKEA also wants to shred contract language that requires then to fill new positions with bargaining unit members within 30 days of the job vacancy. The company instead wants the right to use temporary workers to fill job vacancies.

The Westampton facility was IKEA's first distribution center in the United States and supplies its operations in the eastern US. IKEA is the world's largest furniture retailer with operations in 52 countries and its founder, Swedish-born Ingvar Kamprad, was ranked the eighth richest person in the world in 2018.

Kitchener-Waterloo bus strike enters second week

About 700 bus drivers, mechanics and support staff are in the eighth day of a strike against Grand River Transit (GRT). In a result that surprised both management and Unifor officials, workers voted against a contract recommended by the union. About 70,000 people use the transit system each day. The new 17-kilometer ION Light Rail Transit line with a north-south link spanning the cities of Kitchener and Waterloo is not organized by Unifor and continues to operate.

Bus drivers and support staff were offered a two percent wage raise per year over the life of the proposed three-year deal. Bus mechanics, who were underpaid in comparison with their counterparts in other southern Ontario cities, were offered a 15 percent increase. Amongst their other demands, drivers insisted on a quicker installation of protective screens than the contract provided and a resolution to unfair disciplinary processes pursued by GRT management.

Looming in the background of the dispute was a move by 326 workers in the union local who demanded a vote to decertify from Unifor. That vote was taken less than one week before Unifor reached their tentative agreement with GRT. The move to decertify was put to a vote on January 8. On January 13, GRT and Unifor reached a last-minute contract settlement.

On January 14 the Ontario Labour Relations Board announced that the attempt to decertify failed to win a majority of votes. But the subsequent vote to ratify the proposed contract on January 19 mustered a majority of workers who rejected the deal. No new negotiations are currently planned.

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