

## Mexican medical workers protest lack of supplies

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

### **Mexican medical workers protest lack of supplies, protocol for Covid-19 cases**

Protests by doctors, nurses and interns broke out last week at hospitals in Mexico as the number of coronavirus cases grew. The common theme was the woeful lack of supplies to treat patients and protect the workers from infection.

At the Mexican Social Security Institute's (IMSS) Zone 27 General Hospital in Tlatelolco, a suburb of Mexico City, doctors, nurses and personnel blockaded a main street on March 19 and chanted, "We want materials!"

The protesting workers denounced shortages of gloves, N95 face masks, alcohol-based gel, disposable gowns, test strips, protective eyewear and aspiration catheters. A nurse told reporters, "We are not refusing to work, we just want the supplies so that we don't infect ourselves and take that infection home to our families." After talking with protesters, IMSS officials promised to monitor the amount of supplies and guarantee that they would be sufficient.

The next morning, nurses protested in front of the Zone 1 General Regional Hospital in Mexico City to demand that "all supplies be covered, since they don't give a face mask for every shift, in the best of cases, and we lack antibacterial gel and gloves," in the words of one nurse. They also demanded to have a definite protocol on how to treat those admitted with symptoms of COVID-19.

After talks during the day, the IMSS announced that it would train staff in a Strategic Contingency Plan for Attention to COVID-19. The IMSS added that there were as yet no confirmed cases of COVID-19 at the hospital and that there were sufficient supplies, and that it would maintain "strict vigilance" of supplies.

Personnel at the Zone 46 General Regional Hospital in Guadalajara, Jalisco declared that they would work under

protest following the death of a 74-year-old man who had recently visited California, USA and had been admitted for symptoms of arterial hypertension. At least ten workers as well as family members had had contact with the patient, and they were then isolated.

The protesting workers complained of lack of soap, gloves, masks and other equipment and supplies, and demanded that the administration pay for testing of personnel and not take reprisals against them for their protest. They also criticized the lack of support by their union.

### **Mexican university workers vote for date of strike over medical and other benefits**

Members of the University of Sonora Workers Syndicate (Steus) in the city of Hermosillo voted March 19 on the date of a planned strike. The membership voted 1,184 in favor of April 30 as opposed to 257 for May 14. An assembly the day before had been planned but was canceled due to concerns about COVID-19.

The vote was held at a university building where ten persons at a time were given antibacterial gel before going to voting booths. The strike will be held to demand improvements in working conditions, medical services and savings funds for union employees.

At present, the savings fund for unionized workers is 2,900,000 pesos (US\$119,000) while that of "trusted employees," i.e., nonunion workers, stands at 22,000,000 pesos (US\$900,275).

### **Grain receivers in Argentina strike over government work order**

The Grain Receivers Union (Urgara) announced March 20

that its members, who classify grain for export out of Argentina's ports, would stop working until March 25, or "until the national government clarifies the interpretation, extension and application" of the Necessity and Urgency Decree (DNU) drawn up in response to the pandemic.

The union claimed that its activity was not essential and was not subject to work orders that exclude it from isolation in response to the coronavirus outbreak. The agricultural export business sector alleged that the stoppage put 2.2 million tons of grain to be loaded onto 18 ships at risk, since a protocol had already been drawn up and agreed to, and demanded that the Labor Ministry declare "obligatory conciliation" or binding arbitration, which would entail workers returning to work.

Urgara accused the chamber of "making erroneous, malicious and improper interpretations of article 6 of the DNU ... that establishes exceptions to the isolation measure" and that "everything permits us to conclude that our activity is not essential..." The Labor Ministry ordered obligatory conciliation that day. In the strategic Santa Fe province, workers have resisted returning to work in defiance of the order.

### **Contract extension suspends strike by Alaska hospital workers**

The union representing 200 health care workers at the Providence Kodiak Island Medical Center, located off the southern coast of Alaska, agreed March 17 to call off a strike scheduled for March 20 after hospital management altered its concessions contract.

The Alaska Medical Employees Association, which represents nurses, physical therapists, janitors, cooks and other hospital workers, negotiated fruitlessly for a year with management over demands to slash sick days and on February 1 voted to authorize a strike after a 96 percent rejection vote.

With the advent of the coronavirus threat and backed by substantial community support, workers made the case that they had to retain their sick days in order not to report to work and possibly infect patients and co-workers. Non-union hospital management staff, who already had the cut in sick pay imposed, are alleged to be reporting to work sick.

In the latest proposal, Providence agreed to extend the existing contract, including sick leave, for a period of six months while offering a two percent across-the-board wage increase and annual merit increase and bonus pay. The union has said it will at some future date put the contract to a vote

of the membership.

Hospital CEO Gina Bishop arrogantly continued her vacation off of Kodiak Island as the strike neared and despite Alaska declaring a state of emergency and a March 2 travel ban on all Providence workers leaving the island. Providence management threatened legal action against the union and sought a presidential declaration to bar the strike. The hospital was also prepared to fly in strikebreakers from California.

### **Alberta nurses refuse to work without N95 protective masks**

Community nurses in three Edmonton assessment clinics are refusing to perform coronavirus testing on patients unless they are provided with N95 respirator face masks. Currently, the nurses have been issued with lower standard surgical masks.

The provincial government's Alberta Health Services has insisted that the surgical masks are sufficient for COVID-19 testing and cite the recommendations from the World Health Organization and the Canada Health Agency. The nurses, however, assert that many other professional agencies such as the U.S. and European Centers for Disease Control and the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions should be used when supplies of the superior equipment are stable.

Emergency medical technicians in the province who enter premises in their communities currently operate with the N95 masks. The Alberta Health Services has stated that it currently has an adequate supply of the N95 masks but wants to maintain that supply. The safety of medical staff is paramount if the ravages of the coronavirus are to be mitigated.

Despite numerous studies showing the necessity for preparing for a pandemic scenario, governments in Canada and internationally have shown themselves to be woefully ill-prepared to address the challenges presented by the crisis.



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