

Protests across North and South America continue over lack of coronavirus protections

Workers Struggles: The Americas

31 March 2020

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

Uprising by migrant detainees in Tapachula, Mexico

Central American migrant workers held by the administration of Lopez Obrador in the Century XXI Tapachula internment camp in Chiapas state rebelled on March 24, demanding the right to either continue their migration toward the US border or go back to their countries of origin. More than a dozen immigrants managed to escape.

Haitian and Cuban migrants joined the uprising, demanding freedom and that their immigration status be quickly resolved. Elements of the National Guard and Federal Police intervened to crush the protest.

Last week, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission demanded that the AMLO administration end the crowding of immigrant workers into so-called migrant stations and provide them with everything needed to protect them from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Health workers protest in San Luis Potosí, Mexico

Doctors, nurses and health workers employed by the Social and Security Services Institute in the city of San Luis Potosí launched a protest on Friday, March 27. At issue is the extreme shortage of medications and medical equipment, and the state of disrepair of their places of work. In addition, they are demanding better working conditions.

The medical workers declared that they are working under protest. They are demanding the construction of new medical centers and hospitals and that they be provided with proper equipment, including basic instruments such as infrared thermometers, digital pressure measuring tools, and oxygen monitors that keep track of patients' breathing.

During their protest, the health workers displayed their demands on banners. In addition, they vividly described how risky their work is in the current coronavirus pandemic.

Protest by Coca Cola workers in Chile

On Friday, March 27, following four days of demanding sanitary measures at the plant, scores of workers at the Coca Cola plant in the Maipu suburb of Santiago blocked entrances to the facility and denounced the indifference of management as well as Santiago municipal and federal authorities.

Since the coronavirus appeared in Chile, the Piñera administration, in coordination with the CUT trade union federation, has insisted that workers remain on the job while it relaxed labor rules, making it possible for corporate management to inflict sackings and wage cuts.

Venezuela packing house workers protest

Packing house workers employed by La Salva, which packages imported food that passes through the Port of La Guaira, Venezuela's second busiest, are protesting unsafe

and unsanitary conditions in the context of the current pandemic.

La Salva is the largest packing house in Venezuela and the largest private firm in La Guaira. The workers accuse the firm of ignoring basic measures against the spread of the virus. The workers, who work in crowded conditions, lack face masks, sanitary masks, gloves and other items of personal protection. The La Guaira plant lacks potable water and adequate bathrooms.

Absurdly, after repeated complaints, La Salva management distributed paper napkins to the workers, who are routinely forced to work 12-hour shifts. Workers liken working conditions to those of Charlie Chaplin's movie *Modern Times*.

Workers report that Venezuelan labor laws are a dead letter and that the Maduro administration, friendly to La Salva management, has never sent inspectors to the plant. In January of this year, more than 400 packinghouse workers were sacked, with the assistance of government troops, following protests demanding a year-end bonus for 2019.

Strike threat in wake of death of Raleigh, North Carolina, sanitation worker from COVID-19

The president of the Raleigh, North Carolina, City Workers Union warned of a "very strong possibility" that city sanitation workers may strike in the wake of the death of Adrian Grubbs, a 37-year-old, 17-year sanitation worker and supervisor. Grubbs died March 25 after testing positive for COVID-19.

Under pressure from sanitation workers who often staff trucks with four workers riding in a cab, the union sent a letter to Raleigh Mayor Mary-Ann Baldwin, the city manager, and City Council on March 17 with a list of requests: epidemiology work to trace contacts and quarantine workers who may have been exposed; find where Grubbs contracted the virus and date of contagion; all sanitation workers to be tested; reduction of the number of workers in each truck; additional hazard pay equal to time-and-a-half or a \$2-an-hour wage increase; additional personal protective equipment; regular workplace cleaning; rotating schedules of workers every other week with full pay; child care resources for city employees; and paid leave for part-time and temporary workers with reduced hours.

Workers also demanded a meeting with the city manager. According to the union, none of these requests were granted in the lead-up to Grubbs's death.

Charlen Parker, president of the union, told WRAL that only two workers have been quarantined and was not aware that any of 150 people that work in the sanitation department's facility where Grubbs worked have been tested. He conveyed that workers believe "the city is letting us down."

Unsafe work refusals due to coronavirus continue

Last week, 70 sanitation workers for the City of Hamilton, Ontario, refused deployment to their garbage collection routes after filing an unsafe work complaint due to inadequate protection from possible COVID-19 infection. Workers have demanded face shields and N95 masks to guard against splash-backs from green bin collection and garbage cans, proper time for hand-washing and changes in curb-side bagging requirements. The municipality has said it has run out of N95 masks and is unable to comply with worker demands.

Refusals to engage in unsafe work continue to grow throughout the country. Fiat-Chrysler workers in Windsor stopped production for three shifts earlier this month, idling over 6,000 autoworkers. Mail carriers in Peterborough interrupted mail delivery for a day to force health and safety protections. This week, 600 mail sorters in Canada Post's Edmonton mail processing center have threatened to stop work over unsafe conditions unless management addresses important cleaning issues. Last week, community nurses in Edmonton refused unsafe work when they were not provided with N95 masks.



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