

## Workers protest continued lack of protective equipment

# 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 hospital workers strike for protective equipment, supplies**

Medical personnel at the La Perla hospital in Nezahualcōyotl, a city of over a million in the State of México, began a strike on the night of April 9, after the death of the emergency room director from COVID-19. The workers had gone to the personnel department to ask for personal protective equipment (PPE) but, according to one nurse, “They say only with a gown, gloves and [it’s] ready. The truth is that to me it isn’t fair because I believe there was material and there was a donation that has already run out for our watch.”

The workers had demonstrated in front of La Perla to demand PPE 15 days before, but had not received a response. Workers note, however, that members of management have adequate equipment. The workers have been told to use face masks for eight days, and doctors have had to buy their own.

The state health secretary, to whom they also appealed, claimed that there was no strike and that personnel in charge of respiratory infection patients have all the equipment they need. He asserted that the “discontented” workers did not work with those patients. He further claimed that there have been only one confirmed and two suspected cases and that the patients are all in stable condition. He also maintained that the deceased doctor had contracted the disease while traveling abroad.

### **Laid-off Colombian workers protest, block streets over lack of food, aid**

Hundreds of people gathered at the portal of Bogotá’s TransMilenio mass transit station April 7 to protest their situation after their contracts were canceled due to the COVID-19 crisis. In the midst of obligatory isolation and with no money for or access to food, their situation is getting worse every day. The government has imposed a quarantine until April 27.

One of the protesters told El Espectador reporters, “Already two weeks have passed, and nobody has solved anything for us; they threw us out like dogs, without benefits or anything. We don’t have anything to eat, we’ve gone to the mayor’s office, and nothing has

happened. We’re just asking for a solution, that’s all.”

In the Bosa locality of Bogotá, about 50 workers blocked streets and denounced the suspension of their contracts. In addition to laid-off workers, street vendors and others in the informal sector have seen the bottom fall out of their already meager incomes as well.

In Alto de la Virgen, a barrio in a Medellín comuna or township, several dozen residents waved red cloths and protested for humanitarian aid. Some 800 families in the comuna face starvation if they do not get help. The majority of poor families do not have access to the internet, so they are unable to search for ways online to alleviate their situation.

### **Colombian student interns strike over lack of protective equipment**

Student interns at the Industrial University of Santander (UIS) Hospital in Colombia went on strike on April 9. The students, 91 at last count, said that they fear contagion because they cannot count on proper protective equipment for treating patients suspected of COVID-19 infection.

After their requests for PPE were ignored, the interns finally received 20 conventional face masks and one N-95 mask that they were told to share for ten days. There was no second distribution. The students also fear that they don’t have proper training. “We don’t consider ourselves prepared as students to attend patients with COVID-19,” one student representative told reporters. “We don’t have the knowledge nor the means to avoid contagion.”

Fearing that they will lose credit for the semester and possibly face expulsion, the interns have asked the UIS Academic Council to let them adhere to the national quarantine and resume their studies and practice when the emergency has passed.

### **Meat industry workers in Argentina protest firings, nonpayment; police attack**

Workers at the Penta meat refrigeration plant in Quilmes, a city in Argentina’s Buenos Aires province, held a protest April 9 over the recent firings of over 240 workers and nonpayment of wages and benefits. When the workers assembled at the entrance to the plant, a contingent of police arrived and confrontations ensued. Police attacked the protesters with billy clubs and rubber bullets, sending at

least 20 to the hospital. Some of the attacks were later aired on social media. As of April 11, one worker was still in a hospital in critical condition.

The ill will between the workers, whose union is affiliated with the Federation of Meat Workers Syndicates (Fesitcara), and the owner, Ricardo Bruzzese, has been growing since the latter carried out a lockout on March 18 with the intent of changing the company name and getting rid of the union. The Labor Ministry ordered an obligatory conciliation meeting, which Bruzzese refused to attend.

The union has denounced Bruzzese for disobeying a presidential decree that no worker be fired for 60 days in the midst of the pandemic. Bruzzese claimed that he was not the owner, but a director, and accused the union of attempting to extort money from him in exchange for labor peace. The union claimed that Bruzzese paid the cops to attack them. The Quilmes mayor, meanwhile, disavowed the police violence and has put some of them on leave while an investigation takes place.

In response to the denunciations of the police violence, Sergio Berni, the Buenos Aires minister of security, claimed that “the order was not to repress,” but that “the police acted badly.” However, he claimed that those who committed a crime were the workers, for “usurpation of private property.” Berni added that “the problem is not repression but technique, the lack of professionalism.”

### **Illinois food processing workers walk out after worker falls sick with COVID-19**

Some 70 workers at Raymundo’s Food Group in Bedford Park, Illinois walked off the job April 3, one day after being notified a co-worker contracted COVID-19. Workers charged management has done nothing to implement social distancing in the plant and have since self-quarantined claiming two other workers showed signs of the virus.

Workers signed a petition to management demanding a \$2 an hour hazard pay increase and that the plant be disinfected. They claim the company has a long record of forcing employees to work while sick. Management responded by refusing to provide hazard pay and declared they would hire replacement workers to reopen the facility.

The company claims to have hired a professional cleaning but has not indicated they would follow through with a plan on social distancing. “What’s the point of cleaning the plant if workers who are potentially already infected come straight back to work?” Moises Zavala, a union organizer with the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) told the Chicago Sun-Times. “The company didn’t take precautions to stop the spread to begin with, now who knows how many people are infected.”

Workers unionized in November of 2019. Raymundo’s countered by appealing to the National Labor Relations Board to decertify the UFCW.

### **Nurse fired for defending hospital workers against discipline for complaining about lack of protective equipment against coronavirus**

A registered nurse at Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Neptune, New Jersey was fired April 6 for seeking to defend a nurse who was being disciplined. Adam Witt, who worked in the hospital’s emergency room and also serves as the president of the local chapter of the Health Professionals and Allied Employees union, accompanied the nurse to a disciplinary hearing. Management fired him for being a no-show at his job.

According to the union, there have been a rash of disciplinary actions and terminations against nurses who have complained about a lack of personal protective equipment to combat the coronavirus and then resorted to bringing their own masks.

Management has responded by demanding nurses dispose of the masks. After firing Witt, his photo was posted on doors in the hospital notifying staff he was not permitted on the premises. A complaint by the union to the National Labor Relations Board claimed, “his was clearly posted as a warning to other employees to not support the union and not to speak up on behalf of their fellow employees.”

### **Toronto area caregivers walk off job due to lack of protection against coronavirus**

Virtually the entire staff at an adult disability care home in Markham, Ontario walked off the job on Thursday over concerns about the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) in the midst of a coronavirus outbreak at the facility. The workers took the job action after management announced that 10 residents and two employees in the 42-resident long-term care home had tested positive for COVID-19.

Shortly thereafter, evening and night shift workers left their posts leaving only six staff members to attend to the residents. Normally, 36 workers clock in over a 24-hour period. Emergency calls initiated by town officials eventually managed to secure eight additional attendants from the community to work at the home over the weekend after management belatedly began offering double the miserable minimum wage.

The minimum-wage attendants at the home, members of the Service Employees International Union, had earlier raised concerns regarding PPE shortages. Workers were only issued minimal PPE four days before the announcement of the outbreak.

Work at the home for physically and developmentally disabled residents requires close and extensive contact between caregivers and residents. Nonetheless, staff were expected to perform these tasks with virtually no protection, exposing both themselves and vulnerable residents to the potentially lethal virus. Such was the lack of protective equipment at the home that an emergency call went out over the weekend for more PPE for the newly installed skeleton crew.



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