

Strikes continue at over 30 manufacturing plants along the US-Mexico border

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

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The wave of strikes by thousands of workers in the “maquiladora” factories of northern Mexico has accelerated. The workers are demanding that the factories that employ them shut down and send workers home with full pay for as long as the COVID-19 crisis continues. The strikers are also protesting the crowded and poorly ventilated working conditions in these plants.

Spontaneous strikes are taking place in electronic, auto parts, and robotics plants owned by companies such as Honeywell, Lear and Electrical Components International, among others. On Sunday, April 19, it was revealed that 29 maquiladora workers had died from COVID-19 in Ciudad Juarez, a city adjacent to El Paso, Texas.

The Mexico City daily *La Jornada* reported that 15 Mexicali assembly plants, considered “unessential” during the pandemic, have refused to close. Striking workers at these plants earn a fraction of what the typical US workers earn. This disparity has increased in the last few weeks due to a significant fall in value of the peso against the US dollar.

Argentine health care workers protest lack of protective equipment

Last week health workers from 10 Buenos Aires hospitals picketed in front of the Rivadavia Hospital in Buenos Aires as part of a protest over the severe shortage of personal protection equipment for those that treat patients with COVID-19 symptoms.

The protesters also noted the poor quality of the equipment that is available. Health workers referred to thermal shirts that allow wetness to pass through and dissolve and face masks and latex gloves that fall apart, creating great risk of contagion. The pickets also denounced the overall shortage of health care workers in Buenos Aires hospitals.

According to a report by the Buenos Aires daily *Página 12*, the lack of protective equipment affects all areas of the hospitals involved,

including areas populated by patients with high fevers due to COVID-19.

Buenos Aires health workers plan to continue to picket and rally this Tuesday. They also plan to set up soup kitchens for patients and the general public.

Xilox paint factory workers in Argentina strike over wage cut

On April 24, workers at the Xilox paint factory in Loma Hermosa, an industrial city in suburban Buenos Aires, who are demanding back wages and a wage increase, were threatened by the police when they picketed the plant gates.

Xilox management claims that sales are down and their workers will not get their full pay. Instead the company offered partial payments of US\$75 as long as workers stay on the job and fulfill the company’s orders. Workers counter that the company has accumulated sufficient reserves and accuse the company of taking advantage of the ongoing pandemic to cut workers’ wages. The workers also point out that since this struggle began at the beginning of March, the union that supposedly represents them has abandoned their struggle.

While claiming lack of funds, the company continues to contract with outside delivery firms and contingent workers.

The same methods (wage cuts, short hours, threats of closures, layoffs) are being used against industrial workers across Argentina, who are being forced to work throughout the pandemic, with few items for personal protection. In all over 250,000 workers have been forced to accept cuts in pay and hours.

Brazil: Sports equipment workers protest firings

On Friday, April 24, workers employed by the Paquetá sports equipment retail chain rallied in front of one of its stores to protest the firing of 1,500 workers.

At issue is the firm’s decision to sack 1,500 workers with no advance notice and no severance pay, even for high seniority employees.

COVID-19 claiming lives of residents and staff at Connecticut nursing homes

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199 held a news conference April 21 to report that the elderly in Connecticut nursing homes are being hit by COVID-19 cases and members of its union have died. Tom Baril, president of Local 1199 NE, said that roughly 20 percent of the 2,853 COVID-19 deaths in the state as of April 14 have been nursing home residents and that nine members of his union have died while others are in intensive care.

Connecticut's Democratic Governor Edward Lamont claimed, "We're going out and doing the inspections in each and every one of these nursing homes, checking what their infection protocols are, making sure they have the PPE that they need."

But the union said its members in nursing homes face a crisis due to a lack of personal protective equipment. "We continue to see workers fashioning their own PPE out of garbage bags." But the SEIU made clear it continues to defend the Democratic Party by having Connecticut's US Senator Christopher Murphy share the microphone at the press conference.

Nursing homes across the United States are seeing residents succumb to COVID-19 at devastating rates. Nursing homes in Tucson, Arizona and the surrounding Pima County account for 50 percent of COVID-19 deaths. Illinois nursing homes have suffered 35 percent of the state's COVID-19 fatalities.

Whole Foods monitoring data to track worker dissatisfaction

Documents reviewed by the website BusinessInsider.com last week revealed that Amazon-owned Whole Foods has developed a sophisticated "heatmap" that warns the company of conditions at its 510 stores that could lead to potential worker backlash or attempts to organize a union. The map calculates scores by combining more than two dozen metrics.

A statement on the map declares, "The Relations Heatmap is designed to identify stores at risk of unionization. "This early identification enables resources to be funneled to the highest need locations, with the goal of mitigating risk by addressing challenges early before they become problematic."

Among the metrics used are employee "loyalty," turnover, racial diversity, calls made to human resources, violations recorded by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the number of charges filed with the National Labor Relations. Data that is tracked in the vicinity of a store includes unemployment, the percentage of families living below the poverty line, local union membership, distance between the store and the closest union and a log recording organizing and union activity. Also included are average wage compensation, total store sales and workers' compensation claims.

Whole Foods, which is owned by Amazon, employees some 95,000 workers nationwide.

Absentee rates reach new highs in coronavirus pandemic

Workers across Canada who have been deemed essential and not covered by lockdown orders are increasingly recording their fear of virus infection and opposition to unsafe working conditions by absenting themselves from work. Last week, absenteeism rates by meatpackers at JBS in Brooks, Alberta reached levels that threatened the closure of the facility. Up to 1,000 absences have been recorded in a single day.

Management, in an attempt to keep one shift going, have offered a temporary \$4 per hour shift premium for the low-paid workforce, but that has only slightly reduced the labor shortage. Two deaths and 156 cases at the plant have been recorded so far. Workers in the packing plants work elbow-to-elbow and face-to-face with little to no effective Personal Protective Equipment.

A majority of employees in many of the plants are immigrants on Temporary Foreign Worker permits with few protections. Other packing plants, like the giant Cargill facility in High River, Alberta, where over 800 COVID-19 cases have been recorded, have temporarily closed to isolate workers and commence "deep cleaning."

Last Friday, in an attempt to stem the flow of rising absentee rates among long-term home care workers, prison guards and shelter staff in the province of Ontario, Conservative Premier Doug Ford offered a similar \$4 per hour wage increase for the next 16 weeks plus an attendance bonus. Essential workers appealed for the wage hike to be made retroactive to February but Ford rejected the proposal.

Ford's announcement came in the wake of another catastrophe in a Toronto old age home where 26 residents have died over the past two weeks. Staffing levels at the Mon Sheong home had dropped to 20 percent of a normal shift contingent.

In Quebec, the provincial government announced on April 3 a temporary \$4 per hour wage increase for front-line home care workers after the horrendous scandal at the Maison Herron long-term care facility. Without PPE until the final days of the virus crisis, workers began absenting themselves by the dozens.

By March 31, there were only two orderlies in the 134-bed facility along with a handful of personal support workers. Thirty-one deaths were recorded there. Surviving residents were found dehydrated with many lying in their own excrement.



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