

Chile protests resume as workers across the Americas protest lack of COVID-19 protection

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Protests against Chilean president and police violence resume

Chilean protesters took to the streets on April 27 after a lull caused by the coronavirus pandemic. About 200 people converged on Santiago's Plaza Italia, both to denounce the celebration of the 93rd anniversary of the hated national police, the *Carabineros*, and to express opposition to President Sebastián Piñera's recent remarks implying that he might delay the constitutional plebiscite scheduled for October.

There were also protests in Concepción, Antofagasta, Iquique, Valparaíso and other cities. At the Santiago demonstration, the *Carabineros* attacked protesters with water cannon and tear gas, and under cover of the March 19 "State of Constitutional Exception and Catastrophe," which prohibits groups of over 50 people from assembling, arrested around 70 protesters.

That night, a car drove by and a passenger fired into a crowd of protesters, injuring at least 10 people, who were taken to the hospital. It was later discovered that the driver and shooter were "functionaries of the police institution" who were off-duty.

On May 1, International Workers Day, another protest took place, with signs denouncing abuse of workers, layoffs and inadequate protective supplies. Once again, the *Carbineros* used water cannon on the protesters, this time arresting about 50.

The death toll in Chile from protest actions that erupted last year and are ongoing is 31. The number of COVID-19 cases was over 17,000, and deaths were approaching 240 as of May 1.

Chilean media workers vote to strike over salary and benefits

Workers at the Chilean media and publishing company Copesa (Journalistic Consortium of Chile) voted by 305 to 27 on April 30 to go on strike, with 10 blank and two null votes. The vote was a rejection of management's final offer, which contained no wage and benefit improvements.

However, the Copesa unions will not call the workers out immediately but will submit to mediation conducted by the Labor Board.

The strike vote came in the midst of a wave of firings, cuts to paper editions and a management proposal to lower salaries, as has been done at other media outlets.

Argentine textile workers protest union's pay cut agreement

Workers for textile and wool product industries marched down a street in Trelew, a city in Argentina's Chubut province on April 28. They stopped at the headquarters of their union, the Textile Workers Association, to protest an agreement made by the union's national board with factories in the city's Industrial Park. They claimed that the agreement could be used to cut the workers' pay by up to 50 percent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Later, some workers held a meeting with the mayor and municipal functionaries. City officials called for a meeting with textile industry businessmen.

Uruguayan supermarket workers strike for 24 hours over lack of preventive measures

Workers for Disco, Uruguay's largest supermarket chain, held a one-day strike on May 2 to protest the appearance of four cases of COVID-19 and the failure of management to take preventive action. According to the Disco Workers Syndicate, the four cases were discovered in Punta Carretas, a coastal suburb of Montevideo, two in April and two already in May.

A union communiqué said that "the company doesn't have the slightest intention to close the location, putting at risk the health of the staff ... and its customers." It added, "therefore, we are in contact with Public Health Ministry and Social Security authorities, since this is an emergency situation, and we don't want it to be repeated in other locations."

Peruvian nurses protest for better working conditions, pay

Nurses held a protest on May 1 at the Hospital Belén in the northwestern Peruvian city of Trujillo to demand higher wages and better conditions for confronting COVID-19. The nurses currently are paid 1,300 soles (US\$385.30) per month in accordance with their Service Administration Contract (CAS). However, due to a so-called *descuento de ley* (law discount), the real amount is 1,100 soles (US\$326.02).

The nurses also live in constant fear of contagion from COVID-19, since they are not provided with personal protective equipment (EPP in Spanish). One nurse broke down crying as she talked to reporters about having seen colleagues die and of living in fear of bringing the virus home

to her family.

Dominican Republic: Textile workers strike, protest over noncompliance with COVID-19 guidelines

Daily protests by textile workers began April 28 at the Willbes Dominicana, a factory in a free trade zone in Barahona, Dominican Republic. Protesters picketed, burned tires and placed debris at the company entrance to inhibit entry and exit.

The workers had resumed work after a halt to production due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The executives promised to implement protective measures suggested by the International Labour Organization—provision of masks and gloves, social distancing, checking of temperatures upon entry, and provision of disinfectant gel. The workers were also forbidden to talk on the job or at lunch.

A short while after starting their workday at 7:30 a.m., the workers realized that management was not seriously committed to the protective measures. They walked out demanding that the measures be carried out and that the workers be paid their full wages in the interim. They also demanded that their wages, which are much lower than the free trade zone's norm of 11,500 pesos (US\$210), be raised.

On April 29, police were deployed to the site, and some confrontations broke out. In one, a young man was shot in the right leg, after allegedly brandishing a homemade weapon, and was then taken to the hospital.

Minnesota poultry workers protest company's refusal to provide information on COVID-19 cases

On April 27 over 20 workers accompanied by supporters walked out of Pilgrim's Pride poultry processing plant in Cold Spring, Minnesota, angry over management's failure to properly handle COVID-19 cases. Workers described cases where employees with COVID-19 symptoms were still working or returning to work after a brief period off the job.

Mohamed Goni, with the Greater Minnesota Worker Center, told the *Star-Tribune*, "The company is not sharing any information with workers." Workers who were sent home after temperature checks were soon back on the processing line. "The maximum they stayed at home was three days," said Goni.

Initial public awareness about positive cases of coronavirus were the result of phone calls from employees themselves and were not the result of any management alerts. The Minnesota Department of Health, which visited the plant last week, has not provided exact numbers on COVID-19 cases at the plant. Pilgrim's Pride said that it would not release information, claiming respect for families.

Last month a protest took place over lack of information at a Pilgrim's Pride plant in Timberville, Virginia. Pilgrim's Pride is the largest chicken producer in the US and second largest in Mexico. It is owned by the Brazilian company JBS, which was forced to close its Worthington, Minnesota plant due to COVID-19 cases.

Waste management workers protest Republic Services' failure to provide protective equipment

Teamster union members in four states picketed outside the waste management facilities of Republic Services on May 1 to protest the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE). According to Chuck Stiles, president of the Teamsters waste division, "Republic Services workers have reported inadequate and infrequent PPE at worksites across the country, specifically, a lack of puncture-proof gloves, face masks, protective eyewear and face shields."

In March, the union's waste management union sent out letters to all the major companies, including Waste Management, Republic Services, Waste Connections and Recology. Republic Services was the only company that did not respond with a mitigation plan.

Republic Services, whose revenue was \$10.299 billion in 2019, is the second largest waste management company in the US, operating in 40 states and Puerto Rico and employing 35,000 people. About 7,000 are members of the Teamsters.

British Columbia Dollar Tree workers denounce lack of virus protections

Low-wage retail workers at "extreme discount" Dollar Tree stores in British Columbia are speaking out about the dangerous lack of company actions to curb the transmission of the coronavirus in their workplaces. Dollar Tree, a Fortune 500 company with over \$24 billion in annual revenues, has 85 stores in Canada with 29 in B.C. There are over 15,000 outlets across North America.

Last week workers in the British Columbia stores told reporters that management had failed to provide any basic personal protection for employees. No masks had been provided. Promises posted on Dollar Store's corporate home page that plexiglass shields would be installed at all work stations by the end of April have not been met in any outlet and will not be installed for at least two more weeks.

Cleaning protocols for shopping carts have not been implemented, placing staff in jeopardy as well as customers. Social distancing procedures limiting the amount of customers in the stores at any one time are ignored. In one store, a worker told *Press Progress* management had given a directive that it is permissible to attend a shift even while suffering from "cold" symptoms.



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