

## St. Paul nurse fired by Allina Healthcare in dispute over 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.

### St. Paul nurse fired by Allina Healthcare in dispute over lack of protective equipment

Cliff Willmeng, a registered nurse at United Hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota, was fired May 8 over a dispute with management over the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and management's refusal to allow nurses a voice in decision-making during the current coronavirus pandemic. Allina Healthcare, which owns United Hospital, "violated hospital policy and expectations regarding uniforms and hospital scrubs as well as his duty to follow the directions of his leader."

"I think what the hospital is engaged in is basic and textbook retaliation. That's what I believe," Willmeng told WCCO. He specifically cited the need for disposable surgical booties and hospital-issued scrubs that are available, but not being distributed to protect nurses.

Willmeng is not alone. Nurse Brittany Livaccari told the *Pioneer Press*, "We have multiple other members who are in the process and not far behind the one who was fired. We'll probably have at this rate a couple of other people who get fired."

Nurses at United Hospital are planning a protest march to the St. Paul capital May 20 to highlight their concerns.

### COVID-19 cases anger Minnesota Amazon workers

Minnesota Amazon workers are angry over the company's failure to protect them in the wake of six new cases of COVID-19 at the company's Eagan warehouse. While the company has provided masks, workers report hand sanitizer receptacles are empty and social distancing is difficult to maintain in the facility and not being enforced by management.

Workers have also complained that the company has not been alerting workers in a timely manner when co-workers contract the virus. One worker who spoke to the *Sahan Journal* said she had trained a worker and later found out he had tested positive for

COVID-19. Her source was not the company, but the mother of the sick worker who contacted employees directly.

Amazon has implemented a points program. Each employee receives 20 attendance points for a three-month period. If they don't come in to work, including a decision to self-quarantine, they lose four-and-a-half points. If they run out of points before the three-month period expires, they get fired.

One Amazon worker said, "We have small kids. My mom has high blood pressure who lives with me. I cannot quit because I need the job. My safety is at risk."

### Uruguayan construction workers to hold partial strike over postponement of wage talks

Last week, the SUNCA construction workers union in Salto, Uruguay announced a 4-hour strike, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. May 20. Workers will march to the Plaza Treinta y Tres, the city's oldest town square. SUNCA has said that it will comply with all COVID-19-related protocols—including facemasks and social distancing—decreed by the Public Health Ministry.

The mobilization was called to protest various aspects of the national government and Construction Business Chamber's handling of the shutdown of the industry in April, and resumption of operations. The shutdown affected 43,000 workers.

Among the complaints of the workers are the postponement of salary negotiations and the failure of the government to agree to sign a decree giving aid to pregnant women, workers at special risk and workers with chronic infirmities. The union also denounced budget cuts to services, public works, housing, schools and infrastructure. SUNCA also slammed the trend toward privatization, particularly in fiber optics.

### Puerto Rican highway workers refuse to go to work over COVID-19 concerns

Workers for the Puerto Rico Highway and Transportation Authority (ACT by its Spanish acronym) stayed at home on May 12 in an effort to get the agency to comply with protocols to safeguard them from

COVID-19. The workers are members of the ProSol Utier union.

In a press statement, the union said that 18 ACT work centers were idled because of the lack of protective clothing and equipment like masks, gloves, soap and sanitizer. It added, “Social distancing measures were not taken, work areas were not disinfected, nor were personnel given guidance on protocols established by the agency and the commitments established previously by the union in a meeting held on May 8.”

The statement referred to Executive Order 2020-38—issued by the administration of Wanda Vázquez on May 1—which permits the phased reopening of some businesses. It allows businesses to submit applications to the Puerto Rico Occupational Safety and Health Administration (PROSHA) of their “self-certified” plans to make their workplaces safe.

Workers in health, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment manufacture, as well as the Banco Popular and Walmart, submitted over 680 complaints to PROSHA between March 14 and April 29, according to a Center for Investigative Journalism report. By May 17, the number of COVID-19 cases was 2,646 with 123 deaths.

### **Argentine riverboat workers strike to demand overdue wages**

Workers for riverboat companies that carry passengers in Argentina’s Paraná delta went on strike May 13 to demand payment for wages for March from Interisleña, the largest of them. The workers’ union, the United Maritime Workers Syndicate, has been in negotiations with riverboat companies since February, calling a short strike in March, but the refusal of Interisleña to pay for wages, overtime and training compelled it to call the strike.

### **Informal sector workers in Argentina protest labor instability**

A group of informal workers held a protest in front of Argentina’s Obelisco national monument in downtown Buenos Aires on May 13. They marched to the Social Development Ministry and then to the Labor Ministry to demand the payment of the Emergency Family Income, meant for informal workers who have been unemployed due to COVID-19 quarantine measures. It was planned to be a one-time payment in April of 10,000 pesos (US\$148).

The protesters also demanded an end to firings as a result of the pandemic. Among the participants were fast food, call center and domestic workers. They called for respect for their labor rights and provision of protective equipment.

The slogan for the protest was “For a quarantine without hunger” and called for “concrete actions for the situation of extreme poverty suffered in the popular barrios.” The action was organized by the National Network of Informal and Precarious Youth, with the participation of a number of social organizations. Protesters wore face masks and observed social distancing.

### **Chilean toll road workers strike for higher wages**

Workers for the Spanish toll road company Albertis, which operates the Central Santiago Freeway, decided by a near unanimous vote to strike on May 13. The vote followed months of negotiations between the Central Freeway Social Enterprise Concession Syndicate and Albertis, in which the firm refused to raise wages. The last raise was agreed to in 2012, following failed negotiations and a strike.

The workers are also demanding a vacation bonus and other benefits that bring them into line with other toll road workers in Rosario Norte and Las Condes. The inequality between administrative and operational personnel, the result of the 2016 separation of their departments, is also a bone of contention.

Albertis, which operates about 770 km (478 mi) of Chilean toll roads, as well as thousands in 11 other countries in Europe and the Americas, has over the years increased its profits, but “the position of the enterprise is that the petitions of the workers were too high and there was no point in reaching an agreement,” according to union secretary Miguel Ceballos. He also noted that management personnel were filling in functions of union workers, and that Albertis was hiring outside, i.e., nonunion, people for whole work areas.

### **Ontario health care workers protest private for-profit nursing homes**

Long-term health care workers demonstrated last week at the office of Conservative Ontario Health Minister Christine Elliott in Newmarket, just north of Toronto. The workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, demanded the ending of the province’s system of for-profit care facilities. Ontario governments of all political stripes—Liberal, Conservative and NDP—have pushed the privatization of elder and home care services since the 1980s.

In the current COVID-19 crisis, for-profit long-term care homes have had twice as many deaths among residents and care workers as non-profit establishments and municipally run facilities. 1,300 residents and five front-line workers have so far died in the province’s long-term care institutions. Thousands more have been infected. The protesting workers also called on the government to expedite the distribution of personal protective eEquipment for carers, which has scandalously continued to be in short supply well into the third month of the coronavirus crisis in the province.



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