

## As COVID ravages Latin America, workers continue to protest response

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

### Twenty-four-hour strike by Argentine tire plant workers over spread of COVID

Workers at a Bridgestone tire plant in Llavallol, a district in Buenos Aires province, struck for 24 hours, beginning at 2:00 p.m. June 17, after a worker tested positive for COVID-19. The workers' union, Sutna, claimed that the walkout was based on "management noncompliance with the most elemental and basic means of prevention." Despite registering symptoms, the worker was obliged to continue working. Later, another worker, who had been at close quarters with the former, was found to be infected. So far there have been six cases of COVID-19 at the plant.

Workers had struck all the plants in the district the previous Friday, June 12, to demand improvements in safety and prevention measures. Sutna proposed "a specific proper protocol" for identifying and dealing with cases of infection. "Management did not take these demands into account and neither did they comply with the basic regulations determined by the authorities," according to Sutna head Alejandro Crespo.

### State workers in Argentine city strike march to demand parity talks, end of repression

State workers in the city of Mendoza, capital of Argentina's province of the same name, struck on June 18 and marched to the capitol building. The demands of the action, called by the State Workers Association (ATE), were a resumption of parity talks, full—as opposed to partial and phased—payment of the year-end bonus, and the end of repression, as occurred in previous demonstrations.

The strike and march were joined by other unions and organizations, including the State Unity Front, judicial workers, educators and casino workers unions. At the gathering in front of the capitol building, one ATE speaker declared that "nobody can live on basic salaries of 10,000 pesos [US\$143]," and denounced the governor for ordering repression against protesters in previous protests, for refusing to recognize licensed nurses and for nonpayment of a 5,000 peso bonus to municipal workers.

Organizers claimed 80 percent participation in the mobilization and vowed to "keep fighting together with the workers defending their rights."

### Brazilian delivery workers plan strike over pay, conditions

Bicycle and motorcycle delivery workers in Brazil announced that they will strike on July 1 to demand that the businesses that use their services assume the costs of safety equipment and pay leave for their colleagues who have been infected by COVID-19.

Among their demands is a minimum pay scale for each delivery. Since delivery workers are classified as self-employed and "autonomous," they are often short-changed and subject to sanctions and violations of their rights. They are demanding that they be classified as employees—not "associates" or "entrepreneurs"—with full labor rights. They also are calling for an end to the "punctuality list," which is used to intimidate them and absolve the companies of any responsibilities for their welfare.

Other issues include personal security, since the delivery workers are vulnerable to robberies and attacks, as well as lack of COVID-19 personal protective equipment (PPE) and designation of specified locations for rest and meals. They have continued to work throughout the pandemic crisis.

### Uruguayan bus drivers union declares "pre-conflict" over proposed wage cut

The Transport Workers and Cooperativists Syndical Association (Ascot) of Uruguay declared itself in "pre-conflict" June 17 over proposals by bus company owners in the Montevideo Transport System and the Montevideo Intendency (IM) regarding wage and benefit issues.

The owners and the IM have proposed a 7.5 percent wage cut, using the effects of the pandemic as a rationale. Ascot has proposed that the companies prolong unemployment insurance and, when service fully resumes, an end to overtime, 24 obligatory workdays and other demands. The companies have not responded.

Ascot called for an assembly on June 23 to decide what course of action to take next to avoid the cut. In the meantime, Ascot head Geovanni Spinetti said that they would continue negotiating, "but already the workers cannot take more of this; all that we could put [on the table] we put. We're not going to keep giving away gains that cost us workers so much."

### Hospital workers in Peru protest lack of PPE and other supplies

Hospital personnel in the Lambayeque region of Peru held their fourth

protest June 16 against delays in the delivery of PPE and other COVID-19-related supplies. The protesters demanded equity in the distribution of the needed materials by the Regional Health Agency.

Wilmer Antón Mayanga, head of the General Workers Confederation of Peru (CGTP), slammed the policy of the agency, which only gives equipment to professionals who have contact with infected patients. “The danger is in all levels of attention. You cannot neglect the personnel, since the contagion is in the community.”

Antón Mayanga blamed corruption for the inadequate provision of masks and other supplies. “While corruption continues to take over state resources, doctors, nurses and technicians continue to be forgotten and exposed to the coronavirus.” For this reason, he said that the CGTP and other unions would call a general strike.

### **Trinidad and Tobago: Nurses, midwives, home health aides protest for overdue pay, job stability**

Protests by nurses, midwives and home health aides (HHAs) in Trinidad and Tobago have been ongoing since June 13 over a number of issues. Health workers employed by the North Central Regional Health Authority (NCRHA) began protests to press demands, among them the payment of arrears in increments, some dating back to 2013. The overdue monies—student stipends, gratuities, come to about 39 million T&T dollars (US\$4.3 million).

On June 17, NCRHA authorities promised to begin phasing in payments on July 1 but did not address a slew of other issues: permanent status for staff instead of temporary contracts, improved working conditions, a nurses’ hostel, motor vehicle tax exemptions, traveling allowance, health insurance and other benefits.

Meanwhile, at San Fernando General Hospital, part of the South West Regional Health Authority (SWRHA), nurses and midwives held a mid-morning protest, chanting, “If compensation is good for the teachers, it’s good for the nurses,” a reference to teachers who were offered a stipend to work during the summer, while nurses have gotten no such an incentive in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to the issues of the NCRHA protest, the SWRHA protesters added that nurses were told to work on ambulance details, which they say is illegal.

The T&T Registered Nurses Association and the Public Service Association have said that they will continue the protests until they can arrange a meeting with the Minister of Health.

### **Protest in Puerto Rico against governor’s insufficient response to pandemic, unemployment**

A group of protesters demonstrated in front of the Fine Arts Center in San Juan, Puerto Rico on June 18. The protest, called by the Socialist Workers Movement (MST), decried the poor response of the government of Wanda Vázquez, to the COVID-19 pandemic and to the resultant massive unemployment.

MST criticized the Labor Department’s foot-dragging on responding to the needs of unemployed workers and called the government’s “policy of ceding before the designs and interests of big business to open the economy in a shoddy manner” while the procedures and recommendations of the island’s medical “task force” are not followed. “The effect that is going to have is that many sectors of the working class are going to see

themselves affected with exposure in workplaces.”

A protester denounced the government for the predicament that parents have been put in, first with delays or refusals in paying unemployment benefits, then with the push to reopen the economy going forward, but without guarantees of safe spaces for children, a situation that she said “puts a specific sector up against the wall.”

### **Mass absenteeism at Sioux Falls Tyson plant**

Up to 1,200 workers are still off work at the Tyson Food Sioux Falls, South Dakota pork plant are still off work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The workers involved are either infected, quarantined or fall into the high-risk category, meaning they are over age 60 or have a medical condition such as diabetes. There are 3,700 workers at the plant.

Management had insisted that workers return to work by June 15, but has agreed to push forward that date until June 29. Absenteeism was still running at between 30 and 50 percent at some meatpacking plants. Food processing facilities across the US have become vectors for COVID-19 transmission.

### **Ontario frontline workers confront government austerity**

Hundreds of thousands of nurses, health care and retail workers are fighting against the Conservative government of Ontario Premier Doug Ford’s continuing attempts to force workers to pay for the coronavirus crisis. Last week it was revealed that the government was moving forward with a policy to slash the number of statutory holidays of retail workers from 9 to 3 days per year in order to boost the bottom-lines of business owners. But after strong opposition from retail workers and outrage from the general population, Ford was forced to withdraw the proposal—at least temporarily.

Also last week, registered nurses saw an arbitration decision on their wage claim held to a meager 1 percent per year, which was in line with the Conservative government’s austerity legislation limiting public sector wage increases to no more than that amount. The starting wage for nurses in Ontario is currently only C\$33 per hour. The arbitrator gave no consideration to the longer hours and grueling work schedules forced upon nurses, not just due to COVID-19 but also due to continued cuts to jobs in the provincial health care system.

Nurses pointed out that despite the cynical praise handed out by government officials, they were being treated like “zeroes” not “heroes.” Workers still report sporadic resupply of proper PPE throughout the health care system.

At the same time, nurses and thousands of other health care and social service workers are demanding that the government make good on its April promise to temporarily boost wages with a \$4 per hour special coronavirus increase over the next four months. Workers have yet to see a penny of this money, even as the virus has ripped through the health care system, although 375,000 workers qualify for the increase. A promised \$250 per month bonus for working over 100 hours each month over the next four months has also not yet been paid.

In addition, workers protested the failure of the government to include all public health care workers in the scheme. Virus premiums will not be paid to a whole number of professions and job classifications in the hospitals including therapists, front-line intake clerks and the radiologists who conduct the lung x-rays on COVID patients.



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