Albany, New York nurses set to strike; walkout continues at Cerrejón mining complex in Colombia

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Strike by Colombian coalmine workers enters third week while negotiations stall

Workers at the Cerrejón mining complex in Colombia's La Guajira department are continuing the strike they began August 31. As they enter week three of the walkout, the Sintracarbón union and the company are engaging in mutual recriminations, with each side accusing the other of unwillingness to negotiate.

Last week a virtual meeting, or convention, was called by a House of Representatives commission, which the labor minister attended. Cerrejón, however, refused to attend. The minister told reporters, "The enterprise assures that it is not going to touch the convention and the workers say that as long as it [Cerrejón] doesn't touch the convention they cannot advance, but the point of discord ultimately is the implementation of the shifts."

The company's proposed shift change would eliminate one of the four crews, resulting in at least 1,250 layoffs, and it would be unhealthier and more dangerous, earning it the epithet "turno de muerte," i.e., "death shift." Additionally, the shift would give Cerrejón a pretext for cutbacks in transportation services. Management at Cerrejón, the world's largest open-pit coalmine, claims that the shift change is necessary to retain economic viability in the midst of the pandemic and weakened global demand.

Workers fear that Cerrejón could up the ante by cutting off other services, like water, to towns in the mine's vicinity, which so far it has not done. Mayors of some of the towns, jittery over increasing tensions, have offered to serve as mediators. On the other hand, the La Guajira governor, despite the pleas of Sintracarbón, has said nothing about the strike. According to an *El Tiempo* report, Governor Nemesio Roys "has a brother who occupies a high executive position inside the multinational."

Colombian hospital workers strike, again, over unpaid salaries

Over 700 members at the Rosario Pumarejo de López Hospital in Valledupar, a city in northeast Colombia's César department, went on indefinite strike September 10. The action is a replay of a previous strike that lasted from early July until August 20. The workers, including doctors, nurses and support staff, held the first walkout to demand wages that, in some cases, had not been paid for up to 11 months.

The strike, which included hunger strikes by some doctors, finally ended the day after the signing of an agreement with the hospital administration. Since then, the director has fulfilled none of the agreement's provisions. One doctor, Luis Heberto Gómez, called the refusal to comply with the agreement "acts of indifference, indolence and even mockery of the personnel" of the hospital.

Other complaints of the health workers include outsourcing of contracts, worsening of living conditions, and undermining of labor rights. A doctors' spokesman said, "We made the decision to return to strike action owing to the fact that the specialists have not received pay, they don't have contracts with the EPS [government-sponsored health insurance], the means of protection are ineffective while the pandemic keeps growing. The government has ignored our situation, and they only talk about the twists and turns of the ministry, therefore from this Thursday and until they pay us we are going to be in a cessation of activities."

Uruguayan workers set for general strike this week to demand dialog with government

A threatened strike general strike by Uruguay's PIT-CNT labor union federation is drawing closer. On August 20 the federation called for a general strike on September 17. A PIT-CNT statement issued at the time includes demands for "quality work, defense of wages, a basic emergency income for those sectors that remained without income due to the health crisis caused by the coronavirus, and against budget cuts."

Uruguay currently has around 110,000 workers on unemployment insurance, and the number of unemployed is likely to rise as businesses opt for more layoffs and firings while the pandemic continues. Many Uruguayans, however, work in informal or temporary jobs where getting government help is difficult or impossible.

President Luis Lacalle Pau is pushing for budget cuts for education, health and other services to resolve Uruguay's economic problems at

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the expense of workers. A policy of leaving positions vacant as public service workers retire is also in the offing.

The union is calling for a "National Dialog for Employment" that encompasses "the elimination of restrictions to access unemployment insurance, and the search for a normative mechanism that limits firings, generating a period of labor stability while the period through which the worker has access to unemployment insurance lasts." The proposed emergency income would be equivalent to the minimum monthly wage, 16,300 pesos, or US$382.

Government decree heads off strike by Argentine telecom workers, imposes arbitration

A planned 24-hour strike set for September 10 by the Telephonic Syndical Unity Board (MUS), a federation of four national telecommunications unions in Argentina, was suspended on September 9 following an "obligatory conciliation" decree issued by the Labor Ministry. The decree ordered negotiations between representatives of the unions and two firms, Telecom Argentina and Claro SA, to begin September 14.

The strike call had followed another round of negotiations in which, according to a MUS statement, "the Claro and Telecom businesses continued with the attitude of not offering any salary correction." The decree came shortly afterwards.

About 16,000 workers will be affected by the outcome of the talks, which will also cover working conditions. Telecommunications is categorized as an essential service, and telecom workers have been obliged to work throughout the pandemic. Workers have complained about the lack of adequate technical equipment and essential tools, and a MUS communiqué alleges that the firms "speculate that isolation measures make union action difficult" and that "they are trying to capitalize on a humanitarian crisis."

"Obligatory conciliation" talks, often with the participation of a less-than-impartial Labor Ministry official, usually last 15 days, giving the companies time to develop "contingency plans" and wear down worker resistance. Unions rarely defy the decrees, even in cases of continuing management intransigence, and workers are ordered to stay on the job while talks drag on.

Albany, New York nurses rally, vote to strike over low staffing and pay

Nurses and their supporters at Albany Med in New York rallied September 7 in the wake of a strike vote demanding hospital management resolve their complaints over insufficient staffing, low pay and working conditions. The 2,500 nurses provided what they call a "super majority" to strike Albany Med after working two years without a contract.

Jen Bejo, a registered nurse, told the rally, "They called us heroes during COVID, but treated us like zeros. They cut our hours. They unlawfully cut our personal time. They've canceled our annual wage increase. They refused to listen to us about PPE [personal protective equipment], and health and safety issues."

Back in March, as the pandemic crisis crested in New York, 45 health care workers at Albany Med tested positive for COVID-19, which was higher than the number of patients—36.

The union has given the hospital a 10-day strike notice, meaning they could be on strike by the end of this week. Albany Med nurses voted overwhelming in 2018 to join the New York State Nurses Association.

Winnipeg school bus drivers strike

In the first job action since the anti-worker public sector wage control bill of Manitoba's Conservative government was struck down by the province's Court of Queen's Bench, 95 school bus drivers went on strike last week. Parents of about 2,300 students were advised to make alternative arrangements to get their children to school. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the government had already introduced safety regulations drastically reducing the number of students allowed to take school buses. In Manitoba, elementary school pupils are required to attend classes in person while high school students receive a mixture of remote instruction and in-school learning.

The bus drivers, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, have been without a contract for over a year. In 2017, the right-wing government of Premier Brian Pallister passed Bill 28, which imposed a two-year wage freeze on all public employees with a meager 0.75 percent wage increase in year three of any new contract, followed by 1 percent in year four. But last June, a provincial court, calling the bill "draconian," struck down the legislation as an infringement on the constitutional right to free collective bargaining. However, the Progressive Conservative government has appealed the decision and insisted that public employers negotiating with any public sector union continue to follow the wage restraint advice outlined in the original legislation.

In negotiations with the bus drivers the Winnipeg School Division has proclaimed that wages are non-negotiable. The low-wage drivers, who are required to perform additional safety and security duties due to new coronavirus regulations, are demanding wage increases beyond government stipulations.

The dispute with the bus drivers heralds growing unrest among thousands of public sector workers in the province who are moving into negotiations for their own contracts. Health care, education, social service and childcare workers, as well as employees in the crown corporations, all have been without a contract for more than four years.

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