

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

## Latin America

### Ecuadorian unemployed march and protest against government neglect

Unemployed workers, informal vendors, students and residents of Quito, Ecuador marched through the capital's Historic Center on October 1. The marchers carried signs denouncing not only the government of current president Lenín Moreno, but of ex-president Rafael Correa and the mayor, Jorge Yunda. The mobilization took place one year after protests against the elimination of subsidies for diesel and gasoline.

Unlike previous protests, the mobilization did not have official spokespersons; union members and banners were rare. Many of the protesters were private and public-sector workers who were laid off or let go during the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, and they have been unable to return to or find employment since then. They were joined by informal workers and vendors who have also been hit hard by the pandemic and have received scant or no help from the government. They complained as well of harassment by the police.

The march began at a local park and made its way to the Carondelet Palace, the seat of government, which was barricaded and guarded by anti-riot police. There were no major incidents reported between the cops and protesters.

### Latin American food delivery workers join call for international strike

Colombia's National Movement of Digital Platform Delivery Workers issued a Twitter message September 18 in response to a call for a worldwide strike on October 8. Mobile app food delivery services, including Uber Eats, Didi, Rappi, Golvo, iFood and Pedidos Ya have grown explosively in Latin America, and workers have suffered from exploitation, overwork, hazardous conditions, violence, underpayment and other problems. The pandemic has further exacerbated already dismal conditions.

The digital platform delivery companies promote the fiction that their employees are independent or self-employed free agents; thus, the firms skirt labor laws and official wage scales. However, a recent Small Claims Court ruling in Bogotá supported the claim of workers for grocery shopping app firm Mercadoni that their arrangement with the company was indeed a labor-management relationship. The ruling ordered Mercadoni to "pay severance assistance, interest on it, bonuses and paid vacations," and added, "The sentence also establishes that the enterprise should realize social security contributions, for the fund that the plaintiff

chooses."

However, according to Reuters, the ruling "did not calm the demands of the delivery workers, that, ahead of Ricardo Díaz, president of Agremiar, leader of the home delivery workers union, rejected the measure and decided to reinforce the international mobilization call for October 8." There have already been local and national protests by Latin American delivery workers. For example, over 1,000 workers for Rappi held a one-day strike August 15 in Bogotá.

The strike call has gone out to delivery workers in the US, Mexico, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, Spain, France, Italy, countries in Africa and others as well.

### Argentina: police attack protest by laid-off bus drivers

A protest the morning of October 1 by microbus drivers in La Rioja, capital of the northwestern Argentine province of the same name, ended with a confrontation with police, who violently broke up the gathering. Several protesters were injured and arrested, and one protester lost an eye.

The protesters consisted mainly of drivers for the San Francisco bus company who had been laid off when the provincial government decided to end its urban transportation concession with the firm. The government of Ricardo Quintela then created a state business called Rioja Bus but did not reincorporate the laid-off drivers.

In addition, some of the ex-employees claimed that they have not received their last paycheck.

A confrontation in front of the National Bank ensued when police prevented the passage of protesters. Some protesters threw rocks; police responded with rubber bullets and attacked and arrested some of the protesters.

### Mexican research center workers protest planned cutbacks

A group of researchers, professors and students from Mexico's Research and Advanced Studies Center (Cinvestav) held a protest October 1 in front of the Chamber of Deputies in Mexico City. The action was called to express opposition to plans to end public trust funds, some of which are used to fund scientific research.

The protesters carried signs saying, "Science is Development; Science will boost Mexico" and "Public trust fund is not corruption, we are audited," and called attention to the need for funding research, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic that has devastated the nation. Cinvestav was one of the first institutions in Mexico to react to the outbreak, converting a research lab into a diagnostic clinic in February, and later launching seven other COVID-19-related projects, according to an August 12 *Science* report.

However, on April 2 President Andrés Manuel López Obrador ordered

the termination of the trust funds and later that month announced a 75 percent cut to the budget of Cinvestav, which employs around 7,500 people at nine campuses. Although Mexico's Secretary of the Treasury has claimed that there will be no diminution of the funds for Cinvestav, just a transfer to other sources, the employees and postgraduate students are not reassured.

One of the protesters was Liliana Quintanar Vera, a researcher and winner of the 2017 Mexican Academy of Science Prize. She called the planned reshuffle "an attack on the scientific patrimony of the nation." A letter delivered to the legislators pointed out that the elimination of the trust funds would also impede scientific work with foreign scientific institutions.

### **Guyanese sugar workers protest insurance requirements, safety, other issues**

Sugar cane harvesters protested September 28 at the Albion Estate in Guyana against new rules regarding accident claims. Concerns over health safety, severance pay and poor access to cane fields were also raised.

The workers complained that the National Insurance Scheme (NIS) is demanding that, in addition to a supervisor's report and a medical certificate with a doctor's signature, claimants for accident insurance coverage bring eyewitnesses to support their claims. The claimants are expected to bear the costs of the eyewitnesses' lost wages, transportation and meal allowances in the process.

Workers have also complained of slow responses, often of several months, to their claims. They accuse the employer, GuySuCo, of delaying the transfer of contributions deducted from their paychecks to the NIS.

### **Uruguayan retirees demand improvement in pensions**

The National Association of Retirees and Pensioners of Uruguay (Onajpu) held a protest at the Executive Tower in Montevideo October 1. The main demand of the protest was a raise in the minimum pension, on which around 150,000 retirees depend, from its current abysmal 13,785 pesos (US\$324).

The protest took place on Senior Adults Day. Onajpu vice president Carmen Millán criticized the minimum pension but also noted that another 400,000 seniors receive 20,000 pesos, equivalent to US\$470. She added that with the pandemic still raging and with massive unemployment and underemployment, many homes have no recourse other than the totally inadequate pensions to maintain entire families.

### **Chilean clothing store workers protest poor salaries, nonpayment of benefits**

Several dozen workers for the Casa García clothing store in the Chilean city of Los Ángeles, capital of Bío Bío province, held a lively protest in front of the store October 1. The protesting workers demanded the payment of benefits—among them vacation pay, years of service bonuses and other benefits.

Pleading economic difficulties, the Los Ángeles branch of Casa García suspended the labor contract in mid-May and has been in bankruptcy

proceedings since mid-September. Workers fear that the store will renege on accumulated benefits, and they have been unable to secure a document that spells out the terms of the end of the suspension.

In accordance with legal requirements, the workers were supposed to resume work when the store opened at 10:30, so they showed up at 10:00. However, when they tried to enter at the start of the business day, they were denied entry. They then pulled out protest signs and banners saying, "Don't play with our health and benefits," "Pay what you owe us," and "False Bankruptcy." Members of the Carabineros, the national police, arrived on the scene, but the protest was carried out peacefully.

### **United States**

#### **California ambulance workers protest low wages**

Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT) and paramedics for Alameda County, staged a protest September 29 in front of the offices of Falck EMS in Hayward and Oakland, California. Members of the National Association of Government Employees (NAGE) Local 510 are demanding higher wages after months of foot-dragging in negotiations over a union contract.

Falck workers earn 15-20 percent less than workers performing ambulance services in the surrounding counties of Santa Clara and Contra Costa. Company negotiators have offered pay raises in the range of 2-6 percent; a proposal the union says does not go far enough to meet the demands of workers who are highly susceptible to contracting COVID-19.

#### **Workers strike Michigan caster fabrication plant**

Workers at the Albion Casters plant in Albion, Michigan went on strike September 25 after the company demanded mandatory overtime and cutting the number of unpaid doctor's visits from 4 to 2. The 35 striking workers, who are members of the International Association of Machinists Local 435, are opposed to being mandated to work on Saturdays and possibly even holidays with the result being workweeks extending to 56 hours.

"After being told we were critical, essential workers, it was a kick in the gut," striker Don Collins told MLive. "It's just not right for a company—during a pandemic—to take away healthcare days."

Albion Casters is owned by the Colson Group which operates 15 plants in 25 countries across the globe.

#### **Michigan machinists continue strike over company's demand to end pensions**

Machinists at Miller Tool & Die in Jackson, Michigan, who walked off the job September 17 after the company issued a final offer that would end their pensions, are continuing their job action. The 19 workers, according to the International Association of Machinists Local 435, had tolerated lower wages because of the pension plan.

Local 435 Financial Officer Eric Sabin said strikers "went in trying to maintain what we had before, with a small raise to cover increase of health insurance." The company has refused to continue negotiations.

### **Canada**

## Quebec home day care strike ends

Ten thousand home day care workers across the province of Quebec ended their strike last week after their union came to a tentative agreement with the right-wing government of Premier Francois Legault. Although the one-week strike was ended on September 27, workers did not finish voting on the deal until October 4. Results of the vote will be announced today.

After three weeks of rotating strikes across the province, the workers began an all-out unlimited strike against a miserable compensation package offered by the government. Negotiations broke down after the province's Family Ministry presented an "insulting" pay offer to the workers, members of the Federation des intervenantes en petite enfance du Quebec.

The workers, who provide child care services out of their own homes, are paid a stipend by the provincial government in addition to fees collected from parents using their services. Their union has estimated that overall payment works out to only \$12.42 (CDN) per hour. Workers were demanding a payment increase that would equate to \$16.75 per hour. In Quebec's home day care system, parents pay \$8.35 per child per day, with providers.



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