

## Quebec nurses stage blockade to protest brutal conditions

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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### Canada

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

### Quebec nurses protest brutal working conditions during pandemic

Hundreds of nurses and other health care workers blocked two key commuter bridges over the St. Lawrence River in Montreal and Quebec City last week to demand resolution of their contract demands for better working conditions, lower nurse–patient ratios, increased staffing and less oppressive shift schedules. The workers, members of the Federation interprofessionnelle de la sante du Quebec (FIQ), have been without a new contract since March 31 and have made no headway in contract negotiations over the summer period.

Police were called to end the bridge blockades whilst the president of Quebec’s Treasury Board denounced the worker actions.

Over 76,000 public sector nurses, nurse practitioners and therapists are in the midst of a spiking second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic with cases in the province once again exceeding 1,000 per day with increasing hospitalizations, intensive care treatments and deaths. Last March and April, Quebec was the epicenter in Canada of the first wave of the pandemic. To date, 6,050 Quebecers have died from the virus with almost 100,000 cases registered.

Due to the brutal pace of work and continuing shortages of proper personal protective equipment that plagued the health service during the first wave, health care staff have been leaving their jobs in the public sector and seeking employment with private agencies, where nurses believed they could gain more control over their scheduling. More than 1,700 nurses have left their jobs since March. Those private agencies, however, are then contracting nurses back into the public sector, with high mark-ups against the provincial health care budget of the right-wing Legault government.

### Latin America

### Protests in Mexico against end of public trust funds continue

A group of protesters, including academics, scientific researchers, former agricultural workers, human rights and journalism activists, and relatives of victims of crimes, surrounded Mexico’s Senate building

October 20. They gathered to demand the end of plans to defund 109 *fideicomisos*, public trust funds set up to provide resources for a variety of purposes, among them scientific research, scholarships, equipment maintenance, the arts, and media projects. Protests began at the beginning of the month and have continued.

The combined budget for the *fideicomisos* this year is 68 billion pesos (US\$3 billion). Ostensibly “left” president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (aka AMLO) made the claim in September that the attack on the fund would be a blow against abuse and corruption and a means to direct more funds into fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. He and his supporters in the national legislature claim that there will be no diminution of funding for scientific research, a claim that the scientific community regards with skepticism.

Critics maintain that with more centralization of the funding in the Interior Ministry, the government will be able to freeze out applicants who are critics of AMLO and his Morena party.

A little before noon, protesters chanting “More science, less obedience!” partially blocked the entrance of the Senate, while others assembled in front of a hotel where a Senate commission was supposed to discuss the issue. The meeting failed to reach a quorum. A group of customers of the Banco Famsa—which filed for bankruptcy in August—also joined the protest.

### Ecuadorian nursing home workers stage protest for unpaid wages

Workers at the Christ the King Home for the Aged in Cuenca, Ecuador, held a sit-in protest on October 20 to demand that the Economic and Social Inclusion Ministry (MIES) pay four months’ outstanding wages they are owed. MIES owes the workers US\$360,000. (Ecuador does not have a national currency.)

Some 65 workers are affected. Wearing masks, the workers gathered in the nursing home patios and held signs saying, “I am the head of my family” and “We don’t have anything to eat” and “Stores don’t trust MIES.”

The director of the nursing home, which cares for 125 elderly people, told reporters that every time she has attempted to resolve the issue with MIES, “they give evasive [responses].” In June, MIES delivered US\$362,482, less than half of the approximately US\$900,000 it had agreed to provide.

A spokesperson for the workers told reporters, “Every year it’s the same situation and if we don’t protest, if we don’t complain, our wages don’t arrive on time.”

### Protests in Ecuador over response to pandemic, fiscal crisis, firings

Ecuador's Workers Unitary Front (FUT) announced a day of mobilizations for October 22 to protest the government's handling of the country's economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in unemployment and suffering for the Ecuadorian working class. On September 30, the FUT had declared the month of October "resistance month" against "neoliberalism, unemployment and corruption," which it blamed on the administration of President Lenin Moreno.

Although the FUT pledged that the mobilization would be nonviolent, the government deployed a massive police and military presence, with over 2,600 officers in Quito alone. Nationwide, more than 47,000 police agents were called in to "control order." Mayor Jorge Yunda intoned, "Nobody has the right to disrespect our harmonic coexistence, even worse the patrimony of humanity."

About 1,000 protesters marched through Quito's downtown Historic Center, from the Social Security Fund headquarters to the Plaza de Santo Domingo. According to Quito's police commander, Alain Luna, it was "a peaceful protest, with occasional outbreaks of violence." Some youths threw cobblestones at the cops, painted antigovernment graffiti on walls and threw paint on the Santo Domingo church and Sacred Hearts College chapel.

At least four protesters were arrested for "destruction of the cultural patrimony" and one "anti-mutiny" officer was injured. Top cop Luna said that the deployment was "a good operation," and that the "security plan" for the capital will entail the presence of up to 12,000 active police officers for the rest of the month.

#### **Bolivian airport workers go on 24-hour strike for overdue pay**

Workers for Bolivia's Aerial Navigation Airport and Auxiliary Services Administration (Aasana) walked off the job for 24 hours beginning October 21 to demand the payment of their salaries. Aasana "is responsible for the planning, management and administration of the country's airports as well as traffic management and air navigation. It also has the mission to build, improve and maintain Bolivia's public and private airports," according to *bnamericas.com*.

Flights from Santa Cruz, La Paz, Cochabamba and other major terminals were delayed or canceled.

The workers' wages have not been paid for two months. In addition, there have been delays in the payment of other items such as overtime. Aasana's director, who was quick to label the stoppage a "caprice" and "abuse," claimed that the delay was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **Uruguayan teachers' union calls 48-hour strike against budget cuts**

Uruguay's Secondary Education Teachers Association (Ades) voted in assembly on October 20 to strike for two days, October 27 and 28. The walkout will precede and support a one-day national stoppage called by the public sector section of the PIT-CNT federation and the Teaching Syndicate Coordinator of Uruguay for October 28.

The mobilization's focus will be on the budget cuts for education—called "ferocious" by Ades officials—currently under discussion in the legislature.

For the second day of the strike, organizers call for an occupation of the N°3 Dámaso Antonio Larrañaga High School in Montevideo's La Blanqueada barrio, where they plan to hold an assembly. However, the Labor Ministry has said that the protesters will be dislodged if they try.

#### **Argentine Labor Ministry squelches strike by bus drivers with arbitration decree**

On October 22, shortly after Argentina's UTA transportation workers' union called a 72-hour national strike for the 23rd, the Labor Ministry issued an "obligatory conciliation" decree that orders the workers to remain on the job while the parties continue negotiations. The deadline for the talks to come to a resolution is October 27.

UTA announced the walkout, to begin at midnight, after a hearing of public transport drivers that failed to reach an agreement "in the face of the unexpected absence of the authorities of the Ministry of Transport of the Nation."

The main demand that UTA had raised was that drivers in the nation's interior receive the same 30 percent raise that Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (Amba) drivers had recently gained. The basic wage for Amba drivers, retroactively applied from September 1, is 63,000 pesos (US\$806). In addition, they will receive a "Nonremunerative and onetime extraordinary gratuity" of 20,000 pesos, or US\$256.

#### **United States**

#### **Idaho teacher sickout forces closure of schools as coronavirus danger escalates**

Hundreds of teachers in Idaho's West Ada school district called in sick October 19–20 forcing the closure of the school system as the administration was unable to recruit the necessary replacements for the reopening of in-person instruction. The action came a week after Central District Health upgraded Ada County schools to red, the highest COVID-19 exposure and risk category.

On October 14, the West Ada Education Association encouraged teachers to apply for a sick day for the following Monday. The district's school board ignored the threat and one day later it voted 3–1 to implement a hybrid-learning model to begin on the day of the sickout. The next day, the union called on teachers to apply for a sick day on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, parents had begun a recall petition aimed at removing all five trustees on the West Ada School Board. Vice President Steve Smylie resigned in the wake of the sickouts. Board Chairman Ed Klopfenstein stepped down from his leadership position but will remain on the board.

Nevertheless, the school board has refused to back down or come to an agreement with the West Ada Education Association, and the union has suspended further actions until a school board meeting slated for October 27. Capping the tumultuous week, a group of parents backed by the Liberty Justice Center filed suit against the union, claiming the sickout was an illegal strike, as Idaho law bars strikes by educators. However, the statute does not prescribe any enforcement measures that can be brought to bear against the union.

#### **Wisconsin factory workers strike over health care increases**

Workers at the AstenJohnson plant in Appleton, Wisconsin, have been

on strike since October 16 in opposition to the company's plan to force workers to shoulder increased health care costs. The 89 members of the International Association of Machinists Local 1855 twice rejected company proposals by wide margins, and the final strike vote was 60-8.

While details of the contract negotiations have not been made available, the Machinists union indicated that the increases in deductibles and premiums were "significant." A company spokesperson, in defending the concession demands, stated, "Like most industries at this time, the paper industry is experiencing downtime and permanent closures." The AstenJohnson plant fabricates advanced filtration fabrics for the global paper and pulp milling industry.



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