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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

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Tens of thousands of workers and youth mobilized in protest last Thursday, October 29, in many Argentine cities. The demonstrators were responding to the savage expulsion of 1,000 homeless families from the land they had occupied for 100 days in the early morning hours of that October 29 demanding decent housing.

The attack included the burning of precarious homes and possessions, the use of tear gas and the chasing-down of homeless men, women and children, in a vacant field known as Guernica where the homeless had set up camp in the General Perón sector of Buenos Aires Province.

In Buenos Aires, demonstrators blocked roads and streets. Spontaneous popular protests also took place in the main cities of Buenos Aires province. Protests took place along the industrial belt that borders the Paraná River, in the industrial city of Córdoba, in the port city of Rosario, Santa Fé Province and in central and northern Argentina.

Bus operators strike over wages in Brazil

Last Tuesday, bus drivers in the city of Vitoria, Espiritu Santo State, walked out to protest over non-payment of back wages. The two private transit companies that employ the workers have used the difficult times as a pretext for delaying payment of wages. This is the fifth protest by bus drivers this year.

Transit service was restored once the firms guaranteed that workers would get paid at the end of the week.

Mexican teachers and normal students continue holding up freight train lines

As of last week, teachers and normal school students (teachers in training) continued to block rail lines in Michoacán, disrupting the Kansas City Southern Rail lines that transport goods north from the pacific coast Port of Lázaro Cárdenas and into the United States. The blockade impacted shipments of steel, car parts and parts for domestic appliances.

At issue is the payment of back wages, bonuses and scholarships, and teaching jobs for students who graduate. The present job action, by members and supporters of the National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE), began October 2.

Thousands of shipping containers have been held up due to the blockades set up in Uruapan, Pátzcuaro and Morelia.

Kansas City Southern has incurred losses of 300 million pesos (US \$14.1 million) while industry has lost an estimated 5 billion pesos (US \$235.6 million).

Meanwhile, the teachers and normalistas warned that they wouldn't lift their blockades until their demands are met.

Trade unionists rally in Montevideo against Government austerity measures and repressive policies

Last Wednesday and Thursday, members of Uruguay's main union federation (PIT-CNT) marched in Uruguay's capital city, Montevideo, demanding the cancelation of the Law of Urgent Consideration (LUC), and impending budget cuts. Both measures are being pushed by the government of President Luis Lacalle Pou. The LUC legislation, passed under the pretext that the government needs to conserve its resources, limits the right of workers to protest, to picket and to strike against these draconian budget cuts.

Demonstrators carried signs that called for a rejection of budget and wage cuts, the imposition of a gig economy and privatization of government enterprises. Workers also demanded jobs and unemployment subsidies for the 300,000 Uruguayan workers who have lost their jobs due to the coronavirus pandemic as well as an end to cuts in education budgets.

Other signs defended public education and housing rights demanding, “Those that have more need to pay for these! Not those that survive on wages.”

One of the protest leaders declared, “the budget cuts will invite people to fight, which is what we are doing right now!”

United States

St. Joseph, Missouri container workers battle demands for excessive work shifts

Workers at Silgan Containers Corporation in St. Joseph, Missouri are entering their 16th week on strike against excessive work shifts. Members of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air Rail and Transportation Workers Local 2 voted 109-1 back on July 18 to reject the company’s demand for contract language that could force workers to labor 18 days straight on 12-hour shifts.

“It’s unheard of,” said Local 2 secretary Kami Jones, “The way that they have the language written for their holidays, our guys will be forced to work every single holiday. They will not have a holiday off with their family and we have worked every holiday here except for Christmas Day.”

Starting in September, Silgan Containers announced they would hire permanent replacement workers after workers rejected the company final offer. To date, only one worker has crossed picket lines. Currently, there are no negotiations between management and the union.

Unfair labor practice charges by Ohio teachers’ union and school board reveal tensions over pandemic

The school board for Ohio’s Streetsboro public schools has declared it will not allow negotiations with the teachers’ union to be “hijacked” by demands for protections against COVID-19. The school board is claiming that the union’s introduction of “new terms” into bargaining concerning school safety in relation to the pandemic violate labor law and has filed bad faith bargaining charges with Ohio’s State Employment Relations Board.

When negotiations began in November 2019, the Streetsboro Education Association (SEA) says that they proposed bargaining over health and safety. At that time, the issue was due to fears of some teachers over their safety in classrooms in relation to certain students.

But in May of 2020, the SEA notified the board that they intended to expand the discussion on health and safety to issues related to COVID-19. They put these demands in writing in July and August. The school board replied in September it had “no intention to bargain over health and safety standards, including

those related to COVID-19.”

On October 9, the SEA and another district union, the Streetsboro School Support Personnel Association, voted to grant their unions the ability to declare a 10-day strike notice. Once declared, the unions will still have to conduct a final strike vote.

Canada

Nova Scotia shipyard workers stop work over violation of COVID protocols

About ninety workers at the Irving Halifax Shipyard, members of Unifor, refused to work last Tuesday in a job action against the company’s failure to follow the proper COVID-19 Atlantic Provinces’ “bubble” protocols. The refusal to perform unsafe work was prompted by the company deployment of a contractor from Quebec who had not been quarantined for the requisite 14 days after entering the province of Nova Scotia. The contractor had interacted with workers throughout the previous day. Irving management had not notified workers that the contractor had bypassed quarantine. Virus infections in Quebec have skyrocketed over the past two weeks.

The provincial Labour Ministry immediately investigated the work stoppage complaint in an effort to contain the job action. Irving Shipbuilding is the recipient of a multi-billion dollar federal government contract to maintain seven warships for the Canadian Navy in Halifax and build several more. The company is part of the Irving Group, a giant conglomerate based in New Brunswick with holdings in oil, transportation, forestry products, media, food processing, construction and agriculture. The Irving family is listed as the eighth wealthiest family in Canada. Its 250 corporate holdings have an estimated value of \$10 billion.

With such financial and industrial clout, Irving has managed to gain quarantine exemptions from the Nova Scotia government on several occasions. In last week’s case at the shipyard, management failed to notify workers or prepare social distancing work rules for the activities of the Quebec contractor. When such arrangements were made as a result of the job action, work at the facility resumed the following day. The Labour Ministry has not announced any penalty for the company’s failure to abide by health and safety requirements.



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