Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 November 2020

Canada

Manitoba nurses demand more protective equipment and resources to fight COVID spike

As COVID-19 infections continue to spike in the province of Manitoba and across the country, over 1,500 rank-and-file Manitoba nurses have sent an open letter to provincial Conservative Party Premier Brian Pallister and Health Minister Cameron Friesen that exposes the dire state of pandemic preparedness some nine months after the global pandemic was declared. The letter follows a similar action taken by provincial doctors last week.

Shortages of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health workers still plague the hospitals and retirement home facilities. Intensive care units and testing labs are already overwhelmed and staffing shortages are forcing nurses into grueling double shifts, day in and day out. Sick calls continue to increase from infected nurses or nurses placed in preventative quarantine. At least 75 nurses have contracted the virus in the last several months.

Significantly, along with demands for more equipment and staff, the nurses have raised the demand for increased control of their workplaces to include participation in decision-making on questions around increasing staff, procuring necessary equipment and expanding the number of hospital beds.

The nurses' letter solidarized with the action taken by doctors, who have demanded that a lockdown be immediately implemented that would close all non-essential retail establishments and all in-person secondary and post-secondary education and institute rigorous household "bubble" regulations. The demands were rejected by Health Minister Friesen who denounced the action for creating "chaos in the system."

Latin America

Mexican pilots protest delays in pay, uniforms

Pilots for the Mexican airline Aeromar began a protest November 4 over the company's delays in payments of bonuses for overtime, instruction and vacation pay. Aeromar has also failed to replace uniforms for the last two years. Rather than substantive industrial action, however, the protest consists of the 118 pilots refusing to wear their uniforms while flying.

Aeromar has used the COVID-19 crisis as a rationale for lowering wages and delaying benefit payments. The Syndical Association of Aviation Pilots (ASPA) has assisted management all the way in its measures against workers. The union agreed to a 40 percent cut in June, July and August, and 33 percent in November. Contract negotiations were pushed back from June to November, then to February.

ASPA's press secretary told reportelobby.com, "We understand the situation such that we reduced our salary" and "we hope for reciprocity because the salary scheme has been variable." He concluded, "We will analyze more severe measures, but we are confident that it will resolve itself soon. The priority right now is that we do not affect operations."

Colombian mineworkers continue more than nine-week over strike over pay, conditions

After 66 days on strike, the Sintracarbón mineworkers' union at the Cerrejón open-pit coal mine in Colombia's La Guajira department sent a letter November 5 to the nation's ombudsman, Carlos Camargo requesting a meeting. Tripartite talks were already held by the Labor Ministry, the union and Cerrejón management in October, but the company has refused to budge from its main demands, which, according to the union, would result in layoffs and cutbacks in benefits.

The main sticking point, however, is the imposition of a shift schedule that would cut the number of crews from four to three and include a punishing 21-day schedule with two seven-day work periods. The workers, fearing detrimental effects on health and safety, have labeled the schedule the "Death Shift."

According to an infobae.com report, about 10,000 families are affected by the operations of the Cerrejón complex. As far back as March 2020, workers had voted for strike authorization, but it was put on hold by the union citing the pandemic. Online talks were taken up on June 30, but, according to the union, management's position was one of "opposing the spirit of progressiveness that encloses all negotiation," instead intending to claw back gains the workers had struggled to attain.

Ecuadorian hospital cleaning staff protest unpaid wages

About 50 cleaning crew workers at the Teodoro Maldonado Carbo Hospital in Guayaquil, Ecuador held a protest November 5 to demand payment of overdue wages of up to nine months. The hospital, part of the Ecuadorian Social Security Institute, employs about 600 workers in around-the-clock shifts.

The announcement that another company was going to take over cleaning and disinfection of the hospital, without the issue of the overdue money being resolved, increased workers' anger. The hospital director explained that the former company's contract had expired in March and that there was nothing legalized or signed in the interim. A company attorney claimed that sufficient funds have been earmarked for wages from April to September, but the workers have yet to see any of it.

The workers have previously held protests, and as one worker told elcomercio.com, "They have asked us to wait one week, [then] another, until the end of the month." As a result, nine months have passed without workers receiving anything. On the November 5, workers, some carrying

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their cleaning equipment, assembled in the administrative area to demand an agreement to deliver the overdue pay. They were met by security personnel, and a shoving match ensued, with the guards using pepper spray to disperse the workers.

Uruguayan doctors resolve to call one-day strike over stalled negotiations

The Medical Syndicate of Uruguay (SMU) resolved in assembly November 6 to call a 24-hour national strike, with the date to be determined on November 11. SMU officials say they hope there will be movement in negotiations before that date.

Talks between the SMU and private sector firms have made no progress; in fact, the companies' proposals "represent losses of salaries and losses of working conditions," reported Informe nacional. The doctors have also criticized reductions of consultation time in polyclinics, which is "illogical with the pandemic in full swing," and which "debilitate the health system," according to one doctor.

Uruguayan motor vehicle department workers call strike against privatization of medical exam

Workers for Montevideo's Urban Mobility Department held an assembly over the department's decision to privatize the medical exam required for obtaining a driver's license. The workers, including those in inspection, registration and monitoring of traffic cameras, decided on a strike for November 12.

The workers have called for the hiring of more personnel to expedite exams for license applicants, but the administration has declared that option to be "unviable."

Argentine telecommunications workers announce strike over salary demands

Four telecommunications workers' unions affiliated with Argentina's Syndical Unity Board last week announced a 24-hour strike for November 10. The unions at three firms—Telefónica, Telecom and Claro—decided to call the one-day walkout after tripartite parity talks at the Labor Ministry. The companies' wage proposal was described by the unions as "derisory."

Since the July 1 expiration of previous parity talks, the firms have only agreed to pay 6,500 pesos (US$82.23). The unions are calling for a 22 percent raise for the second half of the year. A union official denounced the companies' for offering an increase below the inflation rate while management "shared shovelfuls of dividends, in the millions."

Striking Chilean mineworkers reject latest salary offer, continue month-long strike

Workers at Chile's Candelaria mining complex, who have been on strike since October 8, nixed a new salary offer by management and chose to continue with their work stoppage. In a November 4 vote, the workers, who are members of the Mina Candelaria Workers Syndicate, rejected the offer by a 96 percent margin. Another union joined the walkout in the meantime, bringing the number of striking workers to about 900.

Some 111,400 tons of copper were extracted from Candelaria last year, although that is considered a relatively small amount compared to other Chilean mines. This year, the copper market has experienced fluctuations. According to a *Bloomberg* report, "Copper futures hit a two-year high last month after rising about 50 percent from a late-March low. They've eased since then as a fresh wave of Covid-19 infections in Europe and the U.S. dims the outlook for global growth."

United States

Coca-Cola bottling workers continue strike in Toledo, Ohio

Dozens of workers at the Coca-Cola Consolidated bottling plant in Toledo, Ohio are continuing their strike for improved wages and health care coverage and to oppose unsafe conditions in the facility during the pandemic. The workers, members of Teamsters Local 20, walked out on November 2 after rejecting the company's offer.

On the second day of the job action, a tractor-trailer driven by a strikebreaker hit a picket, sending 59-year-old Jeff Rudnicki to the hospital. No charges have been filed and Toledo police brushed off the incident, claiming that Rudnicki walked in a manner that "intentionally caused him to be struck by the trailer."

There is enormous anger over the resurgence of the pandemic in Ohio and Toledo, where hospitals are being stretched to the limit and workers at the nearby Toledo Jeep Complex carried out a wildcat strike in defiance of the United Auto Workers last March to protect themselves against the spread of the disease. Workers on the picket line are carrying a banner, declaring, "Coca-Cola Consolidated does not protect its employees from Covid-19." The Teamsters and the UAW have blocked any joint action by workers against unsafe conditions, with the UAW locals doing nothing more than sponsoring drive-by demonstration in front of the bottling plant on Sunday afternoon.

Grocery workers in West Virginia vote overwhelmingly to strike

Last Friday, Kroger workers in West Virginia rejected the grocery chain's contract "last, best offer" by a margin of 1,551 to 130 and to approve a strike if no deal is reached soon. The offer by the largest US supermarket company included increase out-of-pocket medical costs and other concessions that were so egregious that officials from the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 400 union called for its rejection.

Kroger, Walmart, Target and other food retailers have seen a sharp increase in revenue and profits during the pandemic as restaurants have been forced to close or limit customers. Management consulting firm Bain & Co. warned Monday that a vaccine for the virus could cut sales by 7 percent next year. At the same time, there have been at least 15,484 grocery workers infected since the pandemic began and 105 deaths.

Paula Ginnett, president of Kroger's Mid-Atlantic Division, said if the contract is not approved "we would be going back to the UFCW and they would be coming back to us and we would continue a dialogue." She added arrogantly, "The reality is no one wins in a strike, certainly not our

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customers who depend on us, especially during a pandemic, certainly not Kroger, and definitely not our associates who if they went on a strike would not get paid."

Kansas City firefighters protest station closures

Firefighters in Kansas City marched in front of city hall on November 6 to protest the closure of Fire Station 15 in the Fairfax Industrial District, which, they say, will slowdown response times and the ability to handle the spread of COVID-19. The workers carried signs saying, "The city is burning us now! Are you next?"

In July, the Unified Government Commission voted to relocate a fire company from the fire station in Fairfax to a new fire station in the Piper area, local news station KSHB reported. International Association of Firefighters Local 64 President J.J. Simma said the additional staffing in the Piper area was long overdue but the relocation has undermined the fire services in the Fairfax district, which includes the 5 million square-foot General Motors plant and other major manufacturers.

"The people who work in the Fairfax area need that fire station down there," Simma said. "It's a highly volatile industrial area where 10,000-15,000 people go to work every day." Several firefighters also expressed concerns about fire personnel having multiple on-duty exposures to COVID-19 that required multiple quarantines that could cause firefighters to run out of sick pay, according to the local media report.

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