

## Medical workers strike across Latin America over pandemic-related issues

# 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

#### Health care workers in Chile continue protests and strikes

Strikes and protests by health care workers across Latin America have shown no sign of flagging. In Chile, following mobilizations the week before, two health care confederations, Confusam and Fenats, called for 72-hour strikes. The nation has now passed 20,000 deaths from COVID-19 due to the policies of the Sebastian Piñera administration.

Confusam, which represents municipal health care workers, began its strike on November 17, with Fenats beginning the next day. The demands of the strikes are repetitions of previous demands: an increase in the health care budget; expansion of contact tracing and other pandemic-related preventive measures; compliance with agreements to raise health workers' pay; payment of bonuses; more attention to primary care; improved working conditions and others.

The federation leaders' stated goal was to convince the Congress to reject the government's inadequate proposals and reverse its essentially herd immunity policies. Despite claiming high participation—100 percent in some provinces—the strikes, like those before them, produced no shift in the executive and legislative branches. On November 22, the federations called for an indefinite strike beginning November 23.

#### Health care workers in Argentina strike over pandemic emergency crisis

Health care workers in Buenos Aires, Argentina struck November 17 over the city government's pathetic five percent pay raise offer, which the State Employees Association (ATE) called "miserable." An ATE statement said, "We demand the granting of an end-of-year bonus for all the health care team in the city; the urgent designation to permanent status of all nursing personnel contracted because of the pandemic; the inclusion in the professional career of nursing, bioimages and surgical instrument handlers." The last demand refers to a 2018 law that classified various medical fields as professions but left out nursing.

Also in Buenos Aires, the Licensed Nursing Association (ALE) began a two-day strike November 20 for decent salaries and recognition as

professionals. The nurses set up camp at the Plaza de Mayo and had a minute of silence at noon for nurses who have died during the pandemic. ALE says that estimates are that the number of fallen colleagues "is nearing 200 people."

On November 19, members of the Neuquén Nursing Syndicate (SEN) walked off the job on a 48-hour strike to demand the hiring of more nurses, a demand that predated the pandemic. They also are calling for reductions in hours, incorporation of contract and temporary personnel to permanent status, and the end of harassment and firings of workers who demand improvements.

Health care workers were not alone in striking and protesting in Argentina last week. Bus drivers in Rosario marched over salary demands on November 18. Teachers in Neuquén struck on November 19 and 20—with plans to strike again on the 24th and 25th—to demand unpaid raises and an emergency education law to upgrade infrastructure and improve salaries and working conditions.

#### Paraguayan medical workers strike, protest over salary, bonus, budget issues

Medical personnel at the Hospital de Clínicas in San Lorenzo, a suburb of Asunción, Paraguay, went on strike November 18 to press their pay, bonus and budget demands. The day before, a group of protesting hospital workers demonstrated in front of the Public Health Ministry (MSP) and attempted to enter the building to request a meeting with officials. The protesters—who had been praised not long before as "heroes in white"—were manhandled by National Police officers and forced out of the building.

The strike, called by the Sitraclin and Sitrahc health care unions, advanced the following demands: payment of the second promised pandemic emergency bonus; equalization of salaries across the health field; sick pay that has not been paid; pay per certification ("title pay"); and an increase in medical insurance coverage.

Two other demands concern budgets and funding. One is compliance with the agreement signed in July 2019 that stipulated an investment of five billion guaranis (US\$709,000) for laboratories, supplies, medicine and reagents. Another is for an increase in the budget for the San Lorenzo hospital to better serve the poor—100 billion guaranis or US\$14 million—a request that dates back as far as 2012, but has been repeatedly rejected by the Chamber of Deputies.

Services considered nonessential, such as teleconsultations, imaging services, and some surgeries, will be suspended during the strike, while emergency services will continue. A Sitrahc official told ultimahora.com, "We are not going to lift the strike as long as there is nothing signed. We

want no more dead letters.”

### **Uruguayan medical unions call one-day strike**

Following meetings from November 13 to 17 with government officials and private sector employers, the Medical Syndicate of Uruguay (SMU) and the Medical Federation of the Interior (FEMI) announced a 24-hour strike for November 18 to protest “scarce advances in the collective negotiation” over salaries and working conditions.

A joint communiqué stated, “In the conjuncture of the pandemic, the proposed salary guidelines are tremendously insufficient, (considering) the loss of real wages and working conditions in previous agreements for medical workers.” A general assembly of the SMU and a general plenary session of the FEMI passed the resolution for the one-day walkout.

The statement said that the strike would be held “in defense of the quality of attention and soundness of the health care system,” and denounced the private health care providers, “who in the scope of action of the National Health Board, refuse to integrate the medical sector in advisory commissions related to fortifying and improving the quality of care.”

### **Coal miners’ strike in Colombia passes 80 days**

The strike at the Cerrejón mine complex in Colombia’s La Guajira department reached its 80th day on November 19 with management and the workers’ union, Sintracarbón, still at loggerheads over wages, working conditions and benefits.

The most critical point of conflict is the push by management for the installation of a shift schedule change that mineworkers fear would likely result in around 1,200 layoffs, since it will reduce the number of crews from four to three. In addition, it would lengthen the shifts and workweeks, adding the risk of more accidents, fatigue and health problems for mineworkers. Little wonder that they refer to it as the “Death Shift.”

Last week, a Labor Ministry-assigned subcommittee of the Salary and Labor Policy Concertation Commission oversaw tripartite talks, which failed to reach an agreement. Cerrejón management had submitted a request for binding arbitration on November 13, but the union has opposed it, saying that it would favor management.

### **Jamaican dairy workers resume strike for wage increase**

Following a supposed settlement fewer than two weeks before, about 70 workers at two dairy farms owned by UC Rusal Alumina Jamaica Limited went back on strike November 19. The workers walked out as the company added additional demands to their offer.

Collective Labour Agreement negotiations between the Union of Clerical, Administrative and Supervisory Employees (UCASE) and Russian-owned UC Rusal have gone on since August 2018. UCASE lifted the previous strike on November 7, two days after 120 dairy workers at several dairy farms belonging to the company had downed their tools over wage demands. The two parties resumed talks at the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MLSS).

UCASE then accepted an offer of a four percent wage increase for each of two years and a monthly laundry allowance of 4,000 Jamaican dollars (US\$27.22). Then the company switched its offer by demanding that the contract be extended for two more years with no wage increases, triggering the current walkout. Meanwhile, meetings at the MLSS were scheduled to continue.

## **United States**

### **Striking New Jersey laundry workers supported by sympathy strike at two New York laundries**

Hundreds of hospital laundry workers at Unitex Corporation’s facility in Perth Amboy, New Jersey walked out to protest the company’s use of termination threats amid bargaining over wages, benefits and COVID-19 protections. Unitex, one of the largest laundering and uniform providers in the Northeast United States with 11 operations in the tri-state region of New York, Connecticut and New Jersey, was also hit by sympathy strikes at two of its Mount Vernon, New York plants.

The contract for the Perth Amboy strikers expired in March and was extended until July. The low-paid workers are demanding wage and pension increases. But the workers have also been stonewalled over their demands for two facemasks daily and for the facility to observe social distancing of six feet. Currently, the National Labor Relations Board is investigating the company’s use of termination threats.

The workers, who are members of a division of the Service Employees International Union, held a November 11 rally in front of the New York-Presbyterian Lower Manhattan Hospital to rally support from health care workers. New York-Presbyterian is just one of many hospitals that contracts with Unitex.

Unitex began its sweatshop operations in lower Manhattan in the early 1920s and has taken over other companies during the course of its history to become a dominant operator within the health care industry. In 2014 it is reputed to have amassed \$150 million in annual revenue.

Unitex worker Brigida Vidal issued a statement, saying, “My co-workers and I have helped Unitex become a very wealthy and successful company. Unitex forced us to strike today after they illegally threatened us and tried to intimidate us into accepting an unfair contract. We are essential workers, and we deserve better from our employer.”

### **Albany, New York nurses announce one-day strikes**

The union representing nurses at the Albany Medical Center in Albany, New York announced November 20 that it would carry out a 24-hour strike on December 1 to protest a host of issues, including contract shortcomings, staffing shortages and the hospital’s failure to provide sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE).

Lenore Granich, a nurse who serves on the union’s bargaining committee, issued a statement, declaring, “We are not walking out. We are being forced out. AMC is not and has not listened to us. COVID-19 is back with a vengeance and our staffing is at critical mass, PPE—especially N95s are being reused multiple times and now our staff members are becoming infected. These conditions put us and our patients at risk.”

Nurses voted to join the New York State Nurses Association two and a half years ago and still don’t have a contract. In the most recent contract,

voted down, nurses were offered a mere 1.25 percent annual raise along with a dubious 1.75 percent merit increase.

The union reports that some 200 nurses have quit their jobs over working conditions, much of it due to insufficient staffing and the hospitals failure to provide PPE. In the week previous to the strike announcement, some 10 nurses became ill with the COVID-19 virus.

Hospital management admits to re-using N-95 masks, claiming it wants to conserve supplies. The union charges that the hospital's disinfecting of masks, using an aerosolized hydrogen peroxide solution or ultraviolet light is "ineffective and dangerous."

## **Canada**

### **Guelph Owens Corning workers strike to end decades of concession deals**

Fifty-five production workers in Guelph, Ontario, members of the Workers United union, went on strike November 20 after overwhelmingly rejecting a one-year contract offer. The plant, which manufactures continuous filament mat, once employed over 600 workers. A series of layoffs, cuts to pensions, holidays and benefits and the implementation of a two-tier wages and benefits scheme over successive contracts spurred a 93 percent rejection vote. At each bargaining session prior to the strike, management presented the same proposed contract as a "final offer," not open to negotiation.

Almost immediately after picket lines went up on Friday, managers entered the plant to re-start production. Over the weekend, the company attempted to ferry scabs through the picket line but were blocked by determined strikers. The company has indicated it will seek a court injunction this week against the legal pickets.

Owens Corning recorded \$289 million in earnings in the last quarter alone as part of a series of profitable quarterly filings. In 2019, CEO Brian D. Chambers reportedly was awarded a 130 percent salary boost to \$6 million per year. Chambers and four other executives also received another \$6.1 million each in performance bonuses.



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