

Health care workers and teachers strikes across the Americas over COVID-19 protections, funding

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

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Chilean health care workers launch strike

Chilean health care workers went on strike Nov. 23 demanding more resources with which to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

The National Federation of Health Workers demand that a meager increase of 8,000 pesos per capita be budgeted for basic health (US\$10.40) have been rejected. “Following 8 months of negotiations, three national mobilizations, and two one-day strikes, we have decided to strike for an indefinite amount of time,” declared a union spokesperson.

Federation president Patricia Valderas declared that the strike would last until the union receives a “decent” response to their requests. “We will not compromise our demands; 80 percent of the population depends on the public health system; we need supplies and resources.” She also indicated that health workers are paid little and risk becoming infected with the coronavirus, victims of the lack of resources and low wages. Valderas also noted that 30,000 health workers have been infected with COVID-19 due to overcrowded hospitals and clinics alongside an increase in deaths.

Meanwhile, strikes and protests continue across Chile. At issue is the defense of basic rights. As a first step workers and youth are demanding that President Sebastian Piñera resign. Mobilizations are also taking place demanding freedom for political prisoners and for all those swept up by the police during months of protests.

Rally by Ecuadorean hospital cleaners

Ecuador public hospital cleaning workers rallied in Quito, demanding back pay. About 600 workers employed as cleaners at public hospitals rallied on Thursday demanding that the government pay them for 8 months of back salaries they are owed.

The demonstrators rallied at the Finance Ministry, carrying signs

and chanting their demands for their back pay. The ministry, responsible for the payment of these back wages, has imposed bureaucratic administrative barriers to the payments of the arrears.

Paraguay farmers and farm workers demand land reform

About 7,000 small farmers and landless farm workers from across Paraguay protested last Tuesday in Asunción, Paraguay’s capital city, demanding that the government carry out a long stalled land reform.

The demonstrators are calling on the Supreme Court to redistribute land “in the hands of very few wealthy landowners.”

In addition, the demonstrators are demanding that the government carry out other promises, such as: the cancellation of debts, land for the landless, and subsidies for farmers affected by an ongoing drought.

Paraguayan president Mario Abdo Benitez opposes the requests, vaguely claiming that farmers and farm workers are being “manipulated.”

Demonstrations in Peru demand hike in education budget

Education workers in Peru demonstrated in Lima and other cities on Tuesday and Wednesday. The teachers are demanding that six percent of Peru’s gross domestic product be apportioned to education.

Joining them at the Lima protest were employees from several local colleges.

In the cities of Puno and Tacna they were joined by education administrative employees and by construction workers, who are also calling for a new constitution.

Strike by Nuevo León, Mexico teachers

A strike, of indefinite duration, began on Nov. 25 by teachers in the state of Nuevo León demanding back wages. The 5,000 strikers represent 144 regular high schools and 9 night high schools.

District 21 of SNTE union, which represents education workers in

Nuevo León, indicated that the government has ignored teachers' demands over several weeks.

State authorities have responded to the strike with threats and repressive measures against all those that publicly oppose their current working conditions, unemployment and pay delays. The response includes layoffs and denying contracts for teachers, secretaries and other education workers.

The SNTE also reported that, since online instruction began, many of the education workers have not been called back to their posts. This is not just an issue of lack of respect, said the SNTE: the non-payment of wages and lack of employment affects the well-being of teachers' families, it also bars them and their families from the public health services amidst the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

San Salvador, Argentina transit workers on strike

On Friday, Nov. 27, over 500 striking public transit workers marched in San Salvador de Jujuy, capital of Jujuy Province in northwestern Argentina, demanding the payment of back wages.

The protest took place on the fourth day of a transit strike. The transit workers walked out in defiance of a conciliatory arbitration ruling from the labor ministry. The public transit companies have resisted paying back wages. Instead they are lobbying for transit fare increases and government subsidies.

United States

Tacoma, Washington health care workers strike over PPE and staffing

Over 100 doctors, physician assistants and nurse practitioners who work at 20 clinics operated by the MultiCare health system in the Tacoma, Washington, area carried through a two-day strike starting Nov. 23, protesting a lack of essential protective equipment, excessive hours and patient overload. In particular, the workers have been demanding management provide secure and tight-fitting N95 masks, as opposed to the loose-fitting surgical masks that do not sufficiently protect against aerosolized coronavirus.

The company has forbidden doctors from bringing personal N95 masks in to work. And to add further insult, MultiCare announced as the strike unfolded that it would provide increased access to N95 masks to other workers in its system, but not to striking clinic workers.

The Union of American Physicians and Dentists (UAPD) called the selective distribution "discriminatory." The UAPD charges, "MultiCare's assembly-line approach and emphasis on profits poses a serious public health threat, especially as COVID-19 cases spike throughout the region."

Matthew Carey, a striking physician assistant, came down with the virus after the first day of picketing. He says he sees between 15 and 30 COVID-suspected cases on a daily basis.

Meanwhile, MultiCare was hit by a coronavirus outbreak at its

Auburn Medical Center that killed two patients. During the period Nov. 5–20, over a dozen patients contracted the infection while 12 workers tested positive.

MultiCare has sought to sidestep the strikers' demands concerning masks by claiming its providers "have adequate PPE." The Centers for Disease Control loophole calls N95 respirators a "preferred" PPE, but labels other lose-fitting face masks as an "acceptable alternative."

ACLU files suit against Hastings, Nebraska meatpacker for failure to take measures to protect workers against COVID-19

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a federal lawsuit Nov. 23 against the meatpacking plant Noah's Ark Processors in Hastings, Nebraska, charging the company with a "shocking indifference to its employees and the community by failing to take common-sense steps to protect them from the spread of COVID-19." The suit represents a number of workers from the plant.

The ACLU said Noah's Ark made no effort to socially distance the more than 300 workers in the plant or replace soiled facemasks. The company has not installed plexiglass dividers, checked employees' temperatures upon arrival to the plant or established higher sanitation precautions in the plant. Workers who contracted COVID-19 were pressured to continue working, despite visible coronavirus symptoms.

Canada

Labour board forces end to Hydro-Quebec overtime ban

A provincial labour tribunal ruled last week that the refusal of workers at the Bersimis hydroelectric generating station and dam to perform evening and weekend overtime was illegal. The workers at the complex 300 kilometers northeast of Quebec City had refused overtime assignments since Nov. 4. Workers had complained of the grueling working conditions, but Hydro-Quebec management merely told the court that the overtime refusals would "affect production." This was enough for the tribunal to outlaw the job action.

Hydro-Quebec is the fourth largest producer of hydroelectric power in the world. As a state-owned crown corporation it employs 20,000 workers across the province. It annually provides at least \$2.3 billion in dividends to its sole shareholder—the Government of Quebec—which also sets and enforces the labour regulations that the Bersimis workers revolted against.



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