

## Health care workers across Americas at forefront of protests over COVID-19 response

# 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

#### **One killed as Peruvian farm workers strike, block Pan America Highway to demand better pay and conditions**

Farm workers struck, marched and blockaded the Pan American Highway with stones and debris in the southern Peruvian department of Ica beginning November 30 to press their demand for better pay and conditions. They also called for the repeal of the 2000 Agrarian Promotion Law that they say has worsened their situation.

On December 3, police attacked protesting workers with tear gas and buckshot. One protester, 20-year-old Jorge Muñoz Jiménez, died from buckshot wounds. The next day, the Congress repealed the law, but it is unknown what will replace it.

The Ica region, which is a desert irrigated by an aquifer fed by glacial melt water, produces grapes, olives, mangos, asparagus and other agro-export crops. It also produces wine and the national liquor known as pisco.

The Agrarian Promotion Law—which was modified by an Emergency Decree last year—was passed to further develop the agro-export sector and supposedly benefit the local population. Workers, however, say that they get about US\$10 for 12- to 14-hour workdays; have been deprived of labor rights; and have not received annual bonuses or vacation pay, since the majority of them toil under temporary labor contracts. Agro-export employers contribute a smaller percentage than other businesses to the social security fund under the law.

The recent decision by the government to extend the law until 2031 sparked the protests. Confrontations and scuffles have taken place with drivers of produce trucks and travelers as well as with police.

#### **Buenos Aires health workers strike, march for wage rise, professional recognition**

Workers for hospitals in Buenos Aires, Argentina struck and marched to the city's government center December 3 for "worthy salaries," dignified treatment, recognition of their professional status and other demands. The State Workers Association, Municipal Doctors Association, Medical

Confederation of the Argentine Republic, Licensed Nurses Association (ALE) and other organizations were represented in the mobilization.

The medical workers denounced the 23 percent wage increase for 2020, since it did not come near to the 35 percent price rise projected for the year. Nurses chafe due to the undervaluing of their job and have demanded that they be categorized as professionals in the nation's job classification system. Members of ALE led a caravan to the home of the City of Buenos Aires Chief of Government, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, who one speaker blasted for considering the nurses "disposable."

One nurse at the rally spoke of the toll taken by the pandemic—almost 200 colleagues who have died since March. ALE announced a "deepening" of mobilizations to press their demands, the next being an encampment December 21.

Although the mobilization did not involve confrontations with police, there was one death. Dr. Alejandro Hakim, 59, head of obstetrics at the Ramos Mejía Hospital, died from a heart attack while marching to the government center.

#### **Oilseed plant workers in Argentina strike for COVID-19 bonus pay**

Workers at oilseed crushing plants in San Lorenzo, an industrial hub and export city in Argentina's Santa Fe province, walked off the job on December 3. The SOEA oilseed workers union called the strike after the CIARA crushers chamber refused to accept a proposal for a bonus for working during the pandemic. CIARA claimed that the bonus was "impossible" and immediately began a media campaign denouncing the strike as illegal and harmful to the national economy.

At the end of the day, SOEA held an assembly in which, according to a union statement, "Workers, delegates and the steering committee evaluated the situation and resolved unanimously to add another day of strike to the union response that is being carried forward." December 5 became the third day of the stoppage, but SOEA called its members to resume work on the 6th. An SOEA official said that workers would meet again to decide on what to do next.

Oilseed workers had struck in October over the same issue but returned to work as SOEA and CIARA continued negotiations. Although some points were agreed to, CIARA remained adamant about the bonus.

Argentina is one of the world's top grain exporters. The walkout has hit key industrial facilities outside of Rosario, which concentrates about 80 percent of the country's agricultural-industrial exports.

#### **Laid-off hotel employees in Barbados protest to demand severance**

pay

Holding homemade signs saying, “We want our money,” “A hungry people is an angry people,” “Together we stand” and other slogans, about 60 former workers for a number of hotels in Barbados demonstrated December 4 to demand their severance pay. The workers, laid off during the first stages of the pandemic, have held several protests, only to be stonewalled by hotel management and the government.

In the latest protest in front of the Accra Beach Hotel and Spa, protesters were joined by former workers from other hotels. Passersby honked horns and waved to show their support. The protest was held in defiance of Prime Minister Mia Mottley, who has issued statements criticizing them for “undermining the confidence that those who may be watching us from outside have in us.” Workers were quick to point out to local media that Mottley was out of touch with working people’s lives and travails.

The protesters have vowed that if they do not get a response from the hotels and the government, the actions will increase and intensify.

### **Antigua and Barbuda retirees protest for payment of pensions**

About 50 retirees in Antigua and Barbuda protested across from the prime minister’s office in St. John’s, Antigua December 3 to demand the delivery of their Social Security payments. The last two monthly payments have not been made, with the government claiming that the pandemic has held up the contributions from private businesses.

Prime Minister Gaston Browne told the pensioners that they would get paid by the end of December, but he was drowned out by shouts from the crowd, with some of them accusing him of favoritism toward businesses.

### **United States**

#### **Los Angeles-area nurses protest lack of staffing, virus testing and protective equipment**

Nurses and other health care workers at Los Robles Regional Medical Center and West Hills Hospital and Medical Center in Thousand Oaks and Los Angeles, California protested outside their facilities to call attention to the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and under-staffing. The picketing comes as some 1,200 health care workers at the two hospitals, along with another 1,200 nurses at Riverside Community Hospital, are preparing to take a strike vote this week.

The nurses, members of the Service Employees International Union, complain of being overworked and not being supplied with new facemasks to replace heavily used PPE. The union has advanced a Pandemic Safety Platform that proposes to conform staffing in the intensive care and coronary units to state regulations of one licensed nurse for every two patients.

Nurses are also calling for immediate notification when they are exposed to COVID-19. The union reports a considerable number of nurses are refused tests by the hospital after finding out they have been exposed to coronavirus.

#### **Las Vegas, Nevada hospital workers launch weekly protests over unsafe working conditions**

Health care workers at Sunrise Hospital and Medical Center in Las Vegas, Nevada launched a new campaign December 2 to call attention to chronic conditions of N95 facemask shortages and insufficient testing for COVID-19 to keep patients, hospital staff and families safe from the coronavirus. Called “Walkout Wednesdays,” the demonstrations are aimed at exposing the refusal of hospital management to address their concerns.

Erika Watanabe, a surgical tech, charged Hospital Corporation of America (HCA), which owns Sunrise Hospital, “If you are going to call us heroes in public then treat us like heroes in private. While all of us are here making a sacrifice HCA CEOs are talking about the profit they’re making because of the high degree of acuity in COVID-19 patients. They need to stop obsessing over profits and make sure hospital workers have everything they need to care for patients.” Watanabe, who works with patients infected with COVID-19, says, “I still have not received an N95 mask from HCA.”

Sunrise Hospital CEO Todd Sklamberg took cover behind the usual refuge of citing the fact that the hospital follows the watered down recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control concerning policies and personal protective equipment for hospital workers.

#### **Anger mounts as UAW ignores strike vote by Sandusky, Ohio Ventra workers**

UAW officials at the Ventra auto parts plant in Sandusky, Ohio say a virtual bargaining session is set for Thursday in long stalled contract talks as the union continues to oppose strike action.

Anger is mounting over the refusal of UAW officials to set a strike date, as the company remains intransigent following the expiration of the previous contract five months ago. The over 2,000 workers make headlamps for Ford. Ventra, formerly operated by Ford, is a division of auto parts company Flex-N-Gate. Workers voted two months ago by a 98 percent margin to authorize a strike.

In a statement a few days ago, UAW Local 1216 president Brett Whyde denounced workers complaining in the local press about working without a contract and lack of information. “It does not help our situation whatsoever,” he wrote. He claimed a strike had to be authorized by UAW officials in Detroit.

In its last offer, rejected by union members, Ventra called for cuts to starting wages and extended the time for new hires to reach full pay.

#### **California Nurses at Keck Hospital USC picket, hold car caravan**

Nurses at Keck Hospital of USC and USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center in Los Angeles, California staged a protest December 2 over unsafe working conditions and management’s implementation of new policies, whose effect will be to force nurses to work even if they contract COVID-19. The new policy covers paid personal time off, attendance and tardiness and nurses charge that the rules are aimed at intimidating them from calling in sick.

Kerri Dodgens, an intensive care unit nurse and member of the California Nurses Association, charged, “USC’s new attendance policy

all but guarantees that staff will be forced to show up to work sick if they want to keep their jobs. This policy is unjust for the staff and dangerous for the patients. It's in violation of multiple collective bargaining agreements with their staff and is also a flagrant violation of the California Kin Care statute. No institution, regardless of their size, is above the law."

## Canada

### Alberta frontline workers protest government withholding of "hero pay"

Health care, meatpackers and retail workers across Alberta continue to voice opposition to the right-wing government of Premier Jason Kenney's failure to distribute federal funds earmarked for the provinces to support and top up the pay of workers in frontline positions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last May the federal government provided \$3 billion in a cost-sharing program to support the wages of essential workers. The 10 provinces and three territories could access the funds by collectively contributing an additional \$1 billion to the program, pro-rated to population. Alberta's share of the funding would amount to \$347 million. However, despite hypocritically lauding essential workers as "heroes," the government has contributed so little to the overall scheme that only \$12 million is available to workers. Kenney, until a recent plummet in the polls, has been a reckless denier of the seriousness of the pandemic.

Workers in the health care sector have staged wildcat actions and work refusals against the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) since last spring. Doctors and nurses have circulated open letters and petitions to the government to immediately issue lockdown orders. Nurses have refused to delay upcoming contract negotiations until later next year.

In the meatpacking industry, workers who have been driven back into the plants by their own unions, which refused to support strike actions, have been forced to take off work to avoid infection. So ineffectual have been the unions that workers sickened by the virus on a long-term basis have flooded the Workers Compensation Board with thousands of workplace-related sick claims.

Between November 2 and December 2, Alberta's total cases more than doubled from 27,644 to 61,169, with a rate of active infections of well over 300 per 100,000 people. The province now has more than 18,000 active COVID-19 cases, more than Ontario, which has triple the population of Alberta, and Quebec, which has almost double the number of residents.



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