

Widespread protests by essential workers across Canada over COVID-19 safety

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Canada

Essential workers across Canada continue protests over unsafe conditions

Nine months after the coronavirus began spreading across the country, essential workers still find that their managements have failed to provide many of the basic health measures to keep workers safe from infection. In London, Ontario nurses are once again demanding the provision of adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and break rooms large enough to allow proper social distancing. Last March, nurses in London hospitals stopped work on 11 occasions, citing their right to refuse unsafe working conditions.

Similar protests have been lodged by medical workers in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba for PPE and increased hiring to alleviate brutal work schedules. In New Brunswick, provincial health care staff have seen Level 3 surgical masks used during the first wave of the pandemic replaced by vastly inferior Level 1 masks. At least 520 nursing positions in the province remain vacant, forcing grueling overtime and a spike in disability claims.

In public transit, workers have refused to operate buses in Halifax, Nova Scotia if passengers enter their vehicles without facemasks. While the Amalgamated Transit Union officials encourage the circulation of a petition for more enforcement of mandatory mask rules, drivers have insisted they will now take matters into their own hands with their work refusals. A similar situation is now brewing amongst Unifor organized transit workers in British Columbia.

Large outbreaks in meatpacking plants in Ontario and Alberta once again threaten masses of workers. Cargill plants in High River, Alberta and Guelph, Ontario have sent home hundreds of workers, who are either already infected with the virus or put into quarantine due to contact with infected workers. When deadly outbreaks occurred in Cargill plants last spring, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union told its High River members that workers must return to work after a temporary shutdown as the union would not endorse any “illegal” job actions.

Latin America

Argentine grain inspectors and oilseed workers strike over stalled contract negotiations

Grain inspectors and vegetable oilseed workers in Argentina’s agro-export sector walked off the job on December 9 to protest the lack of progress in negotiations. As talks continued to stall, the workers, members of the URGARA grain receivers union and the FTCIODyARA oilseed workers union, who had originally planned to stay out for 24 hours, extended the walkout for another day.

An URGARA press release slammed the employers’ total lack of response to their demands declaring, “we have decided to extend the national strike in the oilseeds and grain export sector.” It denounced the employers’ “disinformation campaign, seeking to undermine the workers’ demands and distract public attention from their responsibility in the present conflict.”

URGARA and FTCIODyARA are calling for the reopening of the parity talks of last April that scheduled a 25 percent raise. The response of the CIARA employers’ chamber was three percent from November through March, with an adjustment for inflation—a constant cause of erosion of purchasing power—at the beginning of April.

Argentina’s agro-export sector workers have carried out several strikes recently. Oilseed crushers in San Lorenzo struck December 3-5 over demands for raises and a pandemic-related bonus. The union called them back to work on December 6 and talks resumed.

Strikes by Bolivian medical workers over pay and working conditions

The Medical and Related Branches Syndicate (Simra) of Bolivia’s National Social Security System held a 24-hour walkout on December 9. A Simra communiqué listed the main demands: professional equalization and scheduling for the related branches; a raise in the risk bonus; a COVID-19 bonus for health professionals; and an end to corruption.

Health personnel at health centers in Quillacollo, a city in the department of Cochabamba, struck December 9 to demand the payment of salaries and debts to medical supply providers. The workers returned to their posts on December 11 after the municipal council approved a law to pay about 10 million bolivianos (US\$1.45 million) for wages and debts to businesses. That money will be quickly dispersed, leaving the payment of future purchases and wages uncertain.

On December 12, doctors at the Benigno Sánchez Hospital in Quillacollo struck over the lack of medicine, supplies and equipment maintenance. Surgeries were suspended because the lack of surgical thread would put patients at risk, according to the doctors.

One doctor described the situation to Los Tiempos: “We decided to enter into strike because, practically, we are hunters without weapons; we can’t attend to the population in these conditions. We don’t even have an ambulance ... for critical patients.” Sterilization equipment is virtually useless due to lack of maintenance.

Peruvian Medical Federation announces January national strike for increased health care budget

The Peruvian Medical Foundation (FMP) stated December 12 that it would convoke a national indefinite strike on January 13 to demand an increase in the national health sector budget, higher salaries and improved working conditions. The action will embrace not only medical personnel, but workers at all levels in the health care sector, according to the statement.

In an interview with Canal N., FMP head Godofredo Talavera stated, “In view of the insensitivity of the government and the lack of dialogue of our health minister (Pilar Mazzetti), we are seeing ourselves obliged to restart the indefinite national strike on January 13, 2021. There is no increase in the budget of the health sector.”

The FMP has called a number of limited strikes, the last being in August, to demand more personal protective equipment and greater coverage for medical workers in response to the pandemic. Although the government has held talks with FMP representatives, they have not resulted in significant improvements.

Nurses and other health care workers are not waiting until next year. Some protested outside the Health Ministry last week to demand the budget increase as well as compliance with an agreement to raise their pay in phases that has not been delivered. Nurses in the armed forces also struck for one day and demonstrated in front of the Defense Ministry to demand the so-called “COVID-19 Bonus” earmarked for government employees on the front lines of the battle with the pandemic.

Guyanese municipal workers strike over pay, working conditions

Municipal workers for Corriverton, a town at the mouth of Guyana’s Corentyne River, went on strike December 7 to demand improved pay and working conditions. The workers are represented by the Guyana Labour Union (GLU), which had sent a letter to the municipality on November 13 requesting a meeting to discuss grievances but received no response. Under pressure from angry workers, the union called the strike.

Workers complain that many of them are not being paid the minimum wage of 45,000 Guyanese dollars (US\$214) a month; instead, they are drawing closer to 40,000GYD (US\$190). They have not been paid for overtime work since the pandemic struck in March. Living costs have risen due to the pandemic, making it even more difficult to make ends meet. Eight retirees have not received their service benefits.

In addition, the workers say their work conditions are poor, but if they complain to municipal officials, they are threatened. And despite promises of a retroactive pay hike from 2019, “Any time we approach them, they are always telling us that there is no money.” The mayor, Winston Roberts, has used foul language and threats against them at council meetings.

The striking workers have held protests outside the council building. On one occasion, Roberts drove his car up to the protest, nearly hitting a young woman, and shouted belligerently at the protesters. Several

employees have been issued dismissal notices.

United States

Chandler, Arizona teachers stage sickout after school board votes to continue in-person learning

Teachers in Chandler, Arizona held a sick-out December 11 to protest a decision by the board of the Chandler Unified School to continue with in-person instruction on a weekly, five-day basis after the holiday break. The Chandler Education Association (CEA) did not endorse the sickout, claiming conflicting views among rank-and-file teachers.

The CEA told *azfamily.com*, “Our educators are exhausted and stretched to their breaking point,” and called attention to the fact that other schools in the surrounding Maricopa County had committed to shift to virtual instruction.

One day after the district board made its December 9 decision to maintain in-person learning, Arizona reported almost 5,000 daily COVID-19 cases and 73 deaths.

Portland, Maine firefighters call in sick after co-worker tests COVID positive

Firefighters in Portland, Maine called in sick December 6 after an employee on their shift reported COVID-19 symptoms. According to department policy, unless you are symptomatic or test positive, you will not be sent home.

Portland firefighters work a 24-hour shift. At the conclusion of work, they found out a co-worker had tested positive. The International Association of Firefighters Local 740, the bargaining agent for Portland’s firefighters, said that as essential workers, the union is barred from ordering workers not to go to work and that the sick-out was an independent action by the firefighters.



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