

Chilean health care workers walk out over pay, national strike by Argentine train conductors

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

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

Chilean health workers strike to protest insufficient pay raise

Chile's National Confederation of Municipal Health Functionaries (Confusam) began a national strike December 16. The walkout was called to voice opposition to the paltry raises offered by the government of President Sebastian Piñera; a 2.7 percent rise in monthly wages for up to 1.5 million pesos (US\$2,068) and 0.8 percent for wages up to 3 million pesos (US\$4,137).

In a CNN interview, the Confusam president denounced the "adjustment" that "leaves the majority of our functionaries with less purchasing power than before." He added that the Christmas and end-of-year bonuses have been frozen, with the government justifying it by "arguments that denigrate our actions as workers, and that allude to the help that the state should give to businessmen to sustain the economy." Instead, "They want the crisis to be paid for by those who are risking their lives fighting the pandemic."

Confusam's main demand is a raise that meets or exceeds the inflation rate and sustains working people's purchasing power. Other labor organizations, most significantly the National Public Health Workers Confederation, which announced mobilizations including a march to the Congress, have voiced their solidarity with the strike.

Train conductors in Argentina to carry out 24-hour strike over pay

The Fraternity, a train conductors union in Argentina, announced December 17 that its members would strike nationwide on December 22. The union stated that the strike was being called to press demands for reimbursement of money earmarked for Railway Social Services, a Peronera medical assistance agency for railway workers, that was withheld as a result of the pandemic.

Mexican ferry captains and sailors strike for overdue pay and benefits

Sailors and captains for the maritime ferry business UltraMar, located in Cancún, Quintana Roo, Mexico stopped work on December 15 to demand the payment of their overdue quincena or fortnightly pay. The striking workers, who daily ferry thousands of tourists and local workers on the route between Cancún and Isla Mujeres, say that they have not been paid their end-of-year bonus either. They also accuse UltraMar of abuses and harassment.

One worker told notasquintanaroo.com, "What we're seeking is that they pay, that they pay profit-sharing from last year, from this year, the year-end bonus; they kept the commissions from last year from before the pandemic because they said they didn't have the money."

Trinidad and Tobago: Petroleum workers stage protest over back pay

Several dozen workers employed by Lennox Petroleum Services Limited (LPSL) picketed the firm's office in San Fernando, Trinidad, December 17. The protesters have already protested before to demand payment of outstanding back pay. At this protest, as the Christmas holiday nears, protesters brought their children, some of whom held picket signs asking for their parents' pay. The retroactive wages, according to the OWTU, are in the range of US\$9.5 million.

On July 8, the Industrial Court issued a Court Order instructing LPSL to pay back wages to its employees. The firm appealed the judgment, claiming that the amounts owed were unclear, and that the Oilfields Workers' Trade Union (OWTU) failed to present evidence regarding who was to be paid, how much, and what was the timeline for interest payments. The court rejected the appeal in November.

LPSL continues to claim that it needs clarification from the courts and the OWTU before disbursing any monies. It accused the protesters of "harassment and intimidation" and called the protest illegal, an accusation that the union denies.

Antigua and Barbuda port workers go slow over nonpayment of annual bonus

Port workers in Antigua and Barbuda, angered that they have not received their customary annual Christmas bonus, undertook a work slowdown last week to pressure port management to pay the bonus of 3.5 percent. The Antigua Barbuda Workers Union claims that the bonus is part of their collective agreement.

Prime Minister Gaston Browne, who is also the finance minister, alleged

that the bonus is dependent on productivity, output and profits, and that the pandemic caused a drop of revenue, obviating the grounds for the bonus this year. "It is understood that if a business is not doing well then a bonus cannot be paid. A bonus is not a salary," he stated.

Gaston has hinted that he would discuss with his cabinet whether to furlough port workers, despite this being the busiest time of year for port activity. He has also said that he has notified the Antigua and Barbuda Defense Force that "we may be in need of manpower in the event they decide to take industrial action and seek to lock down the port."

He added in a radio interview, "I have also spoken to the distinguished attorney general who has also prepared an order under section 4, subsection 2, of the Central Services Act to prevent any disruption to the services there."

Panamanian police arrest workers and youth protesting government's pandemic policy

About 150 students and young members of Panama's Suntracs construction union held a protest in front of the Parliament on December 16. They gathered to protest the decision of the president to exclude those under 25 years old and economically dependent from the so-called "solidarity bonus" of US\$100 per month, unless they are workers with suspended contracts.

The students said that they were protesting against the government's "bad management" of the crisis and its "discourse of hatred against the popular classes" that they claim the government promotes. Authorities blame the students for holding "clandestine parties" that contribute to infection and death rate.

At the demonstration, about 20 protesters were detained by the national police for "alteration of peaceful coexistence" after they overturned some barriers and threw rocks at the police cordon protecting the National Assembly headquarters. Police launched tear gas at the protesters and deployed anti-riot units.

By official count, there have been about 200,000 infections and 3,500 deaths in Panama since March.

Buenos Aires doctors call three-day strike over salary demands

Doctors in the Municipal Doctors Association (AMM) of Buenos Aires began a 36-hour walkout on December 15. The temporary stoppage, the third in less than a month, followed negotiations that included not only an insufficient raise, but had no provision for inflation, which is running rampant in Argentina.

The strike affected some 35 public hospitals and 45 Health and Community Action Centers. It also impacted 19 Emergency Fever Units, installed to attend to patients with COVID-19 symptoms. AMM said that testing at the units would continue, although at a slower pace than usual. Minimum services for emergencies were maintained.

The offer by the city was for a 23 percent raise in three stages—13 percent in November, 5 percent in December and 5 percent in January. The doctors consider that figure to be in reality more like 15 percent because it incorporates a 7.9 percent raise owed from last year. The doctors resolved to demand a salary of 100,000 pesos (US\$1,207) for interns and first-year residents, 25,000 pesos (US\$302) for 24-hour on-call substitutes, derogation of the salary tax and advancement to professional status of nursing, among other points.

United States

Brooklyn, New York Whole Foods workers say unsafe conditions leading to coronavirus infections

Whole Foods grocery workers in Brooklyn, New York are charging the company with failing to protect them from coronavirus in the wake of 25 infections at two locations. Nine employees have contracted COVID-19 since October 22 at the Industry City order fulfillment location, while 16 workers have become infected at the Gowanus grocery store since September 10.

At Gowanus, workers point to the company's return to manning back-to-back cashier stations at checkout. Earlier in the pandemic, one of the cashier stations was vacated to conform to social distancing.

"My concern basically is, they're not following the protocol," a worker told the *New York Daily News*. "It's more about the money than our health. I don't think that's fair at all. They get mad if you don't want somebody else in a pod with you."

A worker at the Industry City location charged, "There is no possible way for us to complete our delivery orders and remain socially distant from each other. Management's bottom line is, how fast are you filling orders?" The worker reported that aisles are clogged with employees and the break room is packed with people. When management was apprised of the situation, workers were told they could take unpaid leave if they objected.

Canada

Health care workers across Canada continue to protest lack of Personal Protective Equipment

Almost 10 months since the global pandemic was declared, health care workers across Canada continue to protest the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at their workplaces. In Winnipeg, Manitoba, despite the imminent threat of a second wave, 45 percent of all nursing home workers in the city have not been fitted for the required N95 masks after the program to provide the proper equipment was paused last summer. In New Brunswick, provincial health care workers have seen Level 3 surgical masks, used during the first wave of the pandemic, replaced by vastly inferior Level 1 masks.

In Windsor, Ontario, workers at the Village of St. Clair long-term care facility have not been provided with any N95 masks despite promises from the Conservative provincial government this summer that workers would have full access to PPE, including N95 masks. Over 50 residents at the home and 25 staff have tested positive in the current outbreak with evidence that the lack of equipment contributed to the rapid spread of the virus throughout the facility.

In London, Ontario, nurses are once again demanding the provision of proper 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.



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