

Mexican Interjet workers begin strike; St Vincent Hospital workers launch protests in Boston

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

Mexican Interjet airline workers strike for overdue pay and benefits

Over 5,000 employees at the Mexican airline Interjet began a strike January 8 at airports in Mexico City, Toluca, Mérida and Cancún to demand payment of overdue wages. The workers, including pilots, flight attendants and ground personnel, opted for an immediate strike in an online poll carried out January 5-7 by section 15 of the Confederation of Mexican Workers. The poll had asked, among other questions, if the workers wanted to strike on the 8th or wait until February 1. The tally was 62 percent for the earlier date.

Since September, Interjet has not delivered on its biweekly wage payments or quincenas, as well as the end-of-year bonus, savings contributions and the Infonavit housing fund. In mid-November, it paid one of the quincenas, but has not delivered any more since then. Negotiations and arbitration have had no results. Interjet is also indebted to fuel providers and tax authorities. In mid-December it suspended flights for the rest of 2020.

Costa Ricans protest changes to tax law

Workers and citizens in Costa Rica held protest actions including strikes, roadblocks, cancellations of medical appointments and disruption of classes at educational institutions last week to protest tax changes currently being discussed by the nation's Congress. According to a *Costa Rica News* report, "Already 80 percent of the schools and some 23 unions have united behind the push to abandon the tax reforms."

The "Public Finance Strengthening Law" would convert the 13 percent sales tax to a value added tax at the same rate but will increase the number of products and services covered. It would add taxes to the basic food products, health and education sectors. Protesters claim that the law will most heavily impact lower and middle income groups and will attack public employees' incomes in the name of reining in

spending.

Also in Costa Rica last week, unions and social organizations decried the government's announcement of a plan to begin negotiating loans with the International Monetary Fund this week. A previous announcement in September was met with protests, strikes and roadblocks, and the government backed down for the time being. Although the government had set up "dialogue round tables" supposedly to discuss economic and labor policies with unions and social organizations, the announcement was made without any input from those sectors.

Unions and social organizations are holding meetings this week to strategize in response to the announcement.

Cuban fishermen strike for better pay

Fishermen working the waters around Isla de la Juventud, Cuba's second largest island, began a strike January 5 to demand higher pay. The walkout started when they were told that they would receive a lower payment for lobster.

The strike takes place in the midst of the phasing out of the Convertible Cuban peso, or CUC, which is used mainly by tourists and is pegged to the dollar, leaving the Cuban peso, used by locals, as the only national currency. The exchange rate for the peso is set for now at 24 pesos per dollar, though future fluctuations are probable.

This "unification" of the Cuban currency "is part of a wider reform package which the government has also said will also include modification of salaries, prices and subsidies," according to a Bloomberg report. Cubans for whom the CUC has formed part of their income are seeing erosion of their incomes at the same time that prices have risen.

In addition to the strike by fishermen, there have been protests and strikes by private transportation workers and pork vendors.

Bolivian bus drivers call strike and blockades to defer loan payments

On January 8, the Drivers Confederation of Bolivia called for a 24-hour nationwide strike and blockades January 12 by

interdepartmental, interprovincial and urban bus drivers. The main demand of the one-day walkout is the deferral for six months of loan payments to banks.

The nation's Financing System Supervision Authority contacted the banks January 6 and told them to establish a grace period of at least four months during which bus drivers, hard hit by the pandemic, would only have to pay interest and not principal on loans. The confederation is calling for six months.

One organization, the National Microbus and Small Enterprise Confederation (Conamype), joined the strike call, but criticized the confusing nature of the deferral. Conamype's president said, "In one installment of 3,000 bolivianos (US\$436), for example the interest is 2,500 and 500 is the principal. I believe that isn't any help when the bank is interested that they pay its interests." Members have called the deferral an "uncle's tale" (cuento del tío), i.e., a fairy tale or scam.

Other demands include that the government continue its accident insurance coverage in 2021 under the same terms as 2020 and that the poor condition of the roads, which are in some cases impassable, be remedied.

Argentina Labor ministry squelches protest actions by bank employees

On January 8, the Labor Ministry of Argentina called off a limited strike of employees at about 50 branches of the BBVA and Santander banks and decreed "obligatory conciliation," i.e., binding arbitration. The work stoppage had been called by the Banking Association employees' organization for only two hours, between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m., and on two days, the 7th and 8th.

According to a union communique, the limited action was called to oppose the "adjustment that is shown in the closing of branches and pressures for the reduction of the staff," in which firings and forced retirement figure. The statement further noted that to those "foreign entities. ... it is not important that we are passing through the pandemic tragedy and that it is reemerging. The bad distribution of bank branches that brought us to a critical situation in April 2020 is not important. Limiting banking services to society is not important."

The association also accused the two banks of "refusing to participate in the system of payments [for social services] in our country, that should be a public service." Santander issued a statement denying some of these practices or saying that it is "adapting the model to what our clients ask" and that firings "were totally normal."

United States

Boston, Massachusetts nurses launch daily informational pickets over staffing at St. Vincent Hospital

The 740 nurses at St. Vincent Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts began daily informational picketing January 6 to press home their demands for safe patient-to-nurse staffing ratios and personal protective equipment. The Massachusetts Nurses Association, which represents St. Vincent nurses, has been engaged in negotiations with hospital management for more than a year.

Nurses have filed more than 400 reports documenting conditions they believe threaten patient care as well as the health of caregivers and more than 100 nurses have resigned from the facility. Back in May, nurses voted overwhelmingly to pass a "no confidence" vote against CEO Carolyn Jackson.

In April, Tenet Healthcare, a Fortune 500 conglomerate which owns St. Vincent, put into place a plan to combine furloughs with \$1.6 billion in CARES act loans and grants "to ensure we were focused on maximizing our cash position." The investor-owned health care system made more than \$1 billion in profits in the first three quarters of 2020.

Nurses are raising the alarm as a new surge of the pandemic gains strength following the holidays. Despite Tenet's profits, St. Vincent has refused to put in place an emergency nurse-to-patient ratio of one-to-three in COVID units that was in place during the first surge. Instead, the hospital is co-mingling COVID and non-COVID patients and maintaining a one-to-five ratio of nurses to patients.

Canada

Families demonstrate at Toronto Home Care Residence

Dozens of family members of residents at the St. George Care Community residence in downtown Toronto demonstrated Sunday against the abject failure of the Sienna Living for-profit health care company to protect those that live there. It was the fourth protest outside the facility in the last 8 days.

Virtually every resident at the home has been infected with the COVID-19 virus since the start of the pandemic. Fourteen have already died in the second wave. Thirty employees are currently infected. Conditions are so bad at the facility that management of the home has been temporarily taken over by the provincial hospital network.

The demonstrations have been publicized by the Ontario Health Coalition, a network of more than 400 grassroots community organizations. The group has assisted family members of home care residents throughout the province to organize protests in front of the many home care residences in crisis due to the pandemic. At many of the protests, the families have been joined by hard-pressed and low-paid home care workers who struggle to find adequate personal protective equipment at their workplaces whilst they labour in homes dangerously under-staffed due to widespread infections amongst the workforce.



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