

Peruvian doctors strike, Phoenix area teachers launch sickout over COVID-19 dangers

Workers Struggle: The Americas

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

Latin America

Peruvian doctors strike over salaries, supplies, safety conditions and other demands

The Medical Federation of Peru (FMP) began a nationwide indefinite strike January 13. According to the FMP's Facebook page, the national health workers strike has as its main demands a budget increase for the health sector; compliance with the wage increase progression; payment of a COVID bonus, provision of PPE and protection against layoffs.

FMP president, Godofredo Talavera pointed out in a radio interview, in addition to the above demands, that the doctors "don't have [COVID-19] vaccines; so far, there's no probable date for when they will arrive." He said that with no increase in the budget, "there are no ventilators in many regions and here in Lima there are no molecular tests."

Another key demand is the dismissal of Health Secretary Pilar Mazzetti, who the FMP says has refused to engage in constructive dialogue. As for the budget demand, the government has reneged on its promises repeatedly, according to the FMP.

Talavera affirmed, however, that despite the extremely difficult conditions, the doctors would continue to treat patients infected by COVID-19.

Mexican airline Interjet fails in bid to delegitimize strike

Last week, Mexico's Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Board (JFCA) rejected an appeal filed January 13 by Interjet, one of the nation's largest—and the most deeply indebted—airlines, to declare "nonexistent" the strike begun January 8 by pilots, flight crew and ground workers over unpaid wages and benefits.

Interjet attorneys had claimed that the 62 percent strike vote was illegitimate and did not represent the wishes of the majority of workers, and that many workers had continued working during the strike. Interjet did not, however, include any proposals on how the airline would pay the four months in wages, six months in food vouchers and other benefits, and the end-of-year bonus to its employees.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador supported the ruling,

declaring, "it must be understood that the government cannot be rescuing companies." His further claim that public money has to be used to improve education or the country's health sector was, to say the least, dubious considering his government's downplaying of the effects of the pandemic, including suppression of data, and its repression of teacher strikes and protests.

Meanwhile, another airline, Aeroméxico, has been pressuring the Ministry of Labor to allow it to break its contracts with 374 pilots and flight attendants—adding to the 616 it fired last year—to be able to attain a restructuring loan from the Apollo Global Management Fund as part of a Chapter 11 bankruptcy filed in the US. The APSA and ASSA airline workers unions denounced Aeroméxico CEO Andrés Conesa as trying to set up a *sindicato blanco*, or company union.

Guyanese hire car drivers strike over government fare reduction demand

Private car operators, known as hire car drivers, in Linden, Guyana refused to drive on January 13 over a statement by the Regional Democratic Council (RDC) urging them to return to their original fares after doubling them in earlier stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, their passenger capacity was reduced by 75 percent in accordance with social distancing guidelines. The RDC referred to the national government's December 30 Official Gazette decree that capacity be returned to its previous level and that the drivers revert to the previous fare setup.

The Guyana Times reported, "According to some of these drivers, the main concern is the move to return to the normal capacity, owing to COVID-19 fears."

Bolivian bus drivers federation to hold another temporary strike over debt deferral

The Drivers Confederation of Bolivia decided January 14 to hold another temporary strike for deferral of loan payments for six months. The drivers struck on January 12 and did not get a response from the government that they considered sufficient. This time, the stoppage will be for 48 hours starting January 19.

The Confederation also rejected the signing of an agreement between the government and other transportation sectors, saying that there are contradictions. For instance, the agreement implies that interest and

principal will not be paid during the grace period, but interest will still accumulate on a prorated basis. The question of late charges is not clarified either.

The other demand, repairs and improvements of the often impassable roads, remains unsettled.

Chilean electrical generation engineers strike for pay increase

Chile's SIEP engineers union began a strike at a string of power plants owned by the Italian Enel electricity generation firm January 12 to press its salary demands. The strike vote was 96.7 percent in favor.

Enel Generación held negotiations last year with four unions, concluding agreements with three. SIEP, however, considered Enel's wage raise offer of 1 percent insufficient considering last year's increase in productivity by 23 percent. In addition, according to *Prensa Latina*, "since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, 60 percent of Enel Generación's workforce went to telework, but many other workers remained on site, some in very remote places."

On January 15, Enel issued a press release declaring that the parties had reached an agreement and that the engineers would be back on the job that day. Amid the standard verbiage about "disposition and openness to dialogue with this and all other union leaderships of our company" that "allowed us to reach an agreement and end the strike," no details of the agreement were disclosed.

United States

Phoenix-area teachers launch sickout to protest in-person instruction as COVID-19 deaths skyrocket

Hundreds of teachers in the Phoenix, Arizona area's Peoria Unified School District called in sick January 11 to protest the district board's ignoring of the rising tide of COVID-19 cases and state metrics. The sickout closed some 13 of Peoria's schools and the district held a three-hour meeting the following day in an attempt to counter the teachers' opposition to in-person instruction.

Another 160 teachers in the nearby Dysart Unified School District had planned to call in sick on the same day, but the Dysart Educators United called off the sickout.

Arizona public health metrics were established to monitor the spread of the coronavirus and the Peoria school district had indicated they would follow it. But in December, the board voted to ignore the metrics and allow students to return to school in January. Currently, the Peoria United School District lies in the "red" category—signifying the most dangerous spread of the pandemic.

The Peoria district's decision ignored the catastrophic rise of COVID-19 deaths in Arizona. During an approximate two-month period between September and October, the state's death toll rose by 1,000. From November 3 to December 9—little more than a month—it rose by another 1,000. Then the death toll increased by 1,000 weekly on December 22, January 1, and January 9.

Canada

Ontario education workers refuse unsafe work

Last week, educational assistants for special needs students at John Sweeney Catholic Elementary School in Kitchener, Ontario refused to go to work, arguing it was unsafe to enter the school while COVID-19 cases spike in the community. School boards in the province have been mandated to provide face-to-face learning for high needs special education students whose requirements cannot be met through virtual learning. Due to a new lockdown protocol instituted in Ontario last week, all other students move—at least temporarily—into remote learning procedures.

Just as has occurred in schools across Ontario whenever an unsafe work refusal is filed with the Ministry of Labour, officials quickly ruled that the educators' "issues don't meet the criteria to support a work refusal." The instructors were ordered back to work that same afternoon.

The fight to refuse unsafe working conditions during the pandemic was scuttled at the very beginning of the school year when all of Ontario's education unions connived in September's homicidal school reopening, helping implement the Conservative government's dangerous directives to force a return to in-class learning. In response to the government's refusal to address teachers' demands for smaller classes, better ventilation, smaller cohorts and mandatory mask wearing, they emphatically ruled out a strike or any job action. Instead, they filed a legal challenge at the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB).

Predictably, the OLRB dragged its feet for almost a month before issuing a ruling. In the interim, teachers and students were crammed into overcrowded classrooms, and schools emerged as one of the main sources of new COVID-19 infections in Canada.

Ultimately, the OLRB sided with the government and tossed out the unions' complaint in early October, contemptuously stating that it had no jurisdiction to so much as consider its contents. The unions accepted this outrageous decision without a peep of opposition. In an absurd bureaucratic farce, the unions then followed the OLRB ruling to the letter—even though they themselves described it as "not a sensible approach to the problem of the pandemic." They have instructed their members to file individual complaints to the Labour Ministry based on specific situations at individual schools or even specific classrooms. In effect, the unions have told teachers to wait for virus outbreaks to occur, risking countless lives, before making a humble appeal to the same institutions of the capitalist state responsible for creating the dangerous conditions in the first place.



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