

Health care workers in Mexico protest to demand COVID-19 vaccinations; one day strike threatened by electrical power workers in Puerto Rico

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Private-sector health care workers continued their protests in Mexico City last week to demand that they receive COVID-19 vaccinations. Doctors, nurses, dentists and other health workers congregated at a train station in Mexico City on April 5 to protest the failure by Mexico City's Health Secretariat (Sedesa) head Olivia López to hold a meeting that morning to discuss a national plan for vaccinating private-sector health workers.

Instead of showing up for the meeting to be held in Mexico City at the Naval Medical School—where they had protested the week before—López sent a mid-level functionary to receive their petition with no intention to engage in discussions. Sedesa claims that López made no promise to meet, that she knew nothing about it, and that it is an issue for the federal level.

At that level, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador—AMLO—declared April 9 that the vaccination program had to prioritize people over 60 and claimed that the protests were part of a campaign to discredit him. Next in line per AMLO's agenda are those between 50 and 60, to be followed by public and private schoolteachers.

Mexican health care staff works under protest as they demand vaccinations

Health care personnel in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato have announced that they will work under protest as long as they do not get vaccinations against COVID-19. So far, about 58 percent of the over 60,000 health sector workers in Mexico's sixth most populous state have not been vaccinated.

At last count, 153 health sector workers in the state have succumbed to the pandemic.

The health workers, who include stretcher bearers, lab workers, doctors and nurses among their ranks, have made pleas to the state Health Secretariat, which so far has been slow at responding outside of taking a census and having talks with union officials. The workers, who are wearing black ribbons as a sign of their protest, have expressed themselves in favor of staggered strikes if delays continue.

Mexican university students strike, protest in solidarity with professors striking for overdue pay

Students of the Higher Education Faculty (FES) Acatlán in the state of Mexico blocked a major boulevard near a National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) campus April 7 in solidarity with professors demanding payment of their salaries. About 60 students marched to the boulevard with signs saying, "The strike is not lifted" and partially blocked traffic for about an hour. On April 9, the students announced that they were on strike to demand the end of delays and deductions from the professors' paychecks.

In February, about 600 UNAM FES science professors issued a public statement denouncing the nonpayment of their salaries for the September to January semester. When they were paid on February 10, the checks were for one third of the amount owed.

In March, professors of science, architecture, chemistry, engineering, economics, nursing, obstetrics and other departments struck—some for indefinite periods, others in designated time frames—to demand their full salaries. At least 22 campuses joined the walkouts.

At some UNAM campuses, striking faculty members and students have presented petitions with additional demands, including cessation of intimidation and harassment and measures to counter violence against women.

Salvadoran municipal workers protest withholding of benefits, privatization, firings

Salvadoran Municipal Workers Association (ASTRAM) members carried out a protest in El Salvador's capital San Salvador on April 8. It was the latest in a number of actions to press their demands, including the payment of labor deductions of the Social Security Institute, the AFP pension fund and bank loans, rehiring of some 500 municipal workers sacked during the term of mayor Ernesto Muyschondt and the end of privatization of city services.

ASTRAM has held numerous protests against Muyschondt, who is a member of the right-wing ARENA party, since his election in 2018. He has been accused of misappropriation of six million dollars of government funds and was filmed offering bribes to gang members in 2014. He lost his reelection bid in the February legislative elections and will leave office on May 1.

Puerto Rican electrical workers vote for strike against privatization scheme

On April 6, members of Puerto Rico's Utier electrical workers union voted unanimously in favor of a strike against the Electrical Energy Authority's 15-year contract with LUMA Energy to provide electricity to the island. A one-day strike was called in order to convene a general assembly in San Juan's Roberto Clemente Stadium to discuss and vote on the strike proposal.

At the meeting, union spokespersons denounced the deal as illegal and said that it would lead to higher electricity bills, privatization, job losses and attacks on labor rights.

The overwhelming result does not mean that Utier will immediately call a strike. As union head Ángel Figueroa Jaramillo told El Vocero shortly after the vote, "The strike isn't the aim. We're going to be evaluating the entire process and we reiterate the request that the governor [Pedro Pierluisi] attend to the complaint," and that the walkout would only be put into effect "if necessary." He added, "We are hoping that the secretary of state summons us. So far we haven't had any reaction."

Utier organized a "Truth Route" caravan that wended its way through various municipalities to, in the words of Utier spokesman Carlos López, "disseminate the correct information that clearly makes evident that the contract with LUMA is a terrible business for our people."

Chilean port terminal workers end strike over pandemic demands

Workers at the Sin Vicente International Terminal (SVTI) in Talcahuano, a port city in Chile's Central Zone, returned to work on the second shift of April 8. The workers had walked out on the third shift of April 6 over the lack of adequate measures to assure their safety from COVID-19.

Coverage of the issues in the stoppage was sparse, but one complaint involved a problem with a company that sanitizes equipment on the premises. As talks continued between management and the union, portalportuario.cl reported, "Sources have indicated that the port workers have also brought other points into the conversation through a petition; nonetheless, the meetings have proceeded without major details being made known."

In announcing the end of the strike, SVTI said that it had established more than 30 anti-coronavirus initiatives, such as "digital temperature measurement; installation of automatic porticos for sanitizing trucks and trains; a plan for sanitization of mobile equipment, common areas, dining areas, bathrooms and offices; the formation of a COVID monitors group; and the acquisition of masks, gloves and alcohol gel, among other actions."

Workers strike Texas fiber cable plant over wages, benefits and excessive overtime

About 200 workers walked out on strike March 27 at the Prysmian Group factory in Scottsville, Texas after negotiations failed to meet workers' expectations on wages and benefits. Members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 3057 were offered a five-cent raise while the company sought to increase workers' portion of benefit costs.

The contract originally expired a year ago and the union extended the old agreement until it expired one day before the strike began. Workers are seeking additional compensation for having worked excessive hours through the pandemic.

One of the issues in the contract struggle is a company demand to

reduce the number of "refusals" workers are given to reject overtime from the current five per year. The company has been running the plant 24/7, with added overtime including all holidays.

UAW chairman Earl Roberts told the *Marshall News Messenger*, "With the amount of overtime that they are scheduling for us, those [refusal] days never last the whole year."

The Scottsville plant was originally owned by General Cable Corporation, a multi-national company headquartered in Kentucky, which manufactured copper, aluminum, and optical fiber cables. In 2017, the Prysmian Group, headquartered in Milan, Italy, purchased General Cable. Today, Prysmian is the world's largest cable maker by revenue.

California Kaiser Permanente workers protest company's cutting of bonuses

Kaiser Permanente health care workers held protests March 30 at some 30 company locations across California after the company announced they would cut workers' performance-sharing bonuses by 15 percent in February. The cut comes on the heels of Kaiser's \$6.4 billion in profits in 2020.

Gabriel Montoya, an executive board member of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) called the cut a "slap in the face." Montoya, an emergency room technician who contracted COVID-19 added, "From Kaiser not filling open positions, to limiting the distribution of masks and other (personal protective equipment), to being forced to care for our patients without enough staff, we have been pushed to the brink. We were on board with improving attendance before the pandemic, but we've gotten exposed and sick from COVID because we came to work. Some workers were hospitalized and even died. And for that, they're going to cut our bonus? It's unbelievable."

The SEIU represents some 58,000 workers at Kaiser Permanente facilities in California.

Montreal dockworkers move to re-start 2020 strike

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) gave official notice that it intends to imminently re-start partial strike activity on the Montreal docks after another provocation by the Association of Maritime Employers last week. Immediately after workers rejected the latest concessions "final offer" by an overwhelming 99.7 percent last month, the union, which negotiates for over 1,000 dockworkers, issued a cowardly statement saying it would not move toward strike action. However, despite this, the employers' association last week gave notice that it intends to "suspend certain pay conditions" of the workers beginning April 13.

Management clearly feels empowered to press the initiative after the federal Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau leaked information that just hours after last month's rejection of the "final" contract offer, a draft for a back-to-work order was presented to the cabinet. The developments come after the union demobilized a militant 12-day strike on the docks last summer and agreed to a seven-month "truce" with management as part of its sell-out maneuvering.

The dockworkers have been waging a determined struggle for three years to secure a contract in the face of continuous provocations by the two major shipping operators, Termont Montreal and Montreal Gateway Terminal. They three times voted overwhelmingly for strike action

between late 2018 and the summer of 2020. But no work stoppage occurred until last July, due to a combination of management interference, delaying tactics imposed by the Canada Industrial Relations Board, and the refusal of the union to press the matter.

A series of brief work stoppages beginning in early July culminated in the 12-day strike that was ultimately sabotaged by CUPE in mid-August. The general work stoppage was prompted by management's unilateral decision to slash weekend and night shift wages by 50 percent, and reroute some cargo shipments to other ports, including Halifax and New York.

At the center of the current dispute is the employers Association's push for regressive changes to the current grueling work regime, which compels dockers to work 19 out of 21 days. It is demanding a three-fold increase in the amount of work performed on weekend shifts, and the elimination of jobs, even as the pace of work increases. The conditions of brutal exploitation at the Port of Montreal are enforced by a ruthless disciplinary regime. Since the last contract was negotiated in 2013, workers who have sought to resist the port operators' work regime have been the subject to scores of firings and more than 1,000 days of work suspensions.



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