

Chile's Workers Unitary Central is calling for a nationwide strike on April 30 over wages and other demands while 100,000 teachers in Quebec are staging protests over contract issues.

## Workers Struggles: The Americas

19 April 2021

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### Chilean union federation issues strike call over pay demands

Chile's Workers Unitary Central (CUT) labor federation called for a nationwide strike for April 30, the day before International Workers Day, to press for a wage rise and other demands. The call followed an April 15 CUT National Extended Council meeting of some 200 union officials.

The demands that will be put forward in the strike include a 500,000 peso (US\$711) emergency rent payment, a freeze on food prices and a minimum monthly wage of 500,000 pesos. Most activities—from nonattendance at telework sites to hanging of flags for victims of COVID-19, *cacerolazos* or banging of pots and pans, and honking of horns—will observe pandemic safety protocols.

The mobilization will also voice opposition to the recent appointment of right-wing lower house legislator Patricio Melero to the post of Labor and Pensions Minister. Melero was an active participant in the 1973-90 dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, first as a student leader and pro-coup propagandist, and later as an appointed mayor, at which time he turned over information about dissident students and teachers to the secret police. As a legislator, he has been a consistent enemy of the working class.

### Argentina's Labor Ministry shuts down planned petroleum workers' strike

On April 14, one day before a 24-hour strike called by Argentina's Private Petroleum and Gas Syndicate of Río Negro, Neuquén and La Pampa, the nation's Labor Ministry decreed a 15-day resumption of talks between the union and the Chamber of Hydrocarbon Exploration and Production. The parties had failed to reach an agreement over a pay increase.

Parity talks last year had gotten the union's 24,000 workers a 15 percent raise, but with increases in the cost of crude oil and with

inflation soaring this year, the union is demanding an extra 30 percent after the current agreement expires on May 31. Business reps rejected the demand, although the union offered to delay the raise until October.

In the meantime, Neuquén has witnessed labor unrest in other sectors. Health care workers demanding better pay have been on strike since early April and have blocked roads leading to the huge Vaca Muerta shale oil reserves. Teachers in the province held a 24-hour strike in support of the health workers on April 16 as well.

### Municipal workers in Argentina reject pay offer, go on strike

Public service workers for the city of Allen in Argentina's Río Negro province began a strike April 12 in opposition to the municipality's pay offer. The city offered a 19 percent increment to be given in three installments. The ATE, Soyem and UPCN public sector unions said that the raise "does not reach the level of inflation" and declared that "evidently the executive of Allen does not have the slightest intention to agree to equitable salary guidelines that enable the lowest categories to access a worthy wage."

ATE is calling for a raise of 46.7 percent. Workers held protests at various locations around the city, at one point occupying the municipal complex. Mayor Liliana Martin declared a "vacation" for April 15 and 16.

ATE head Rodrigo Vicente accused Martin of "not making a sufficient effort" to resolve the conflict and said that the unions were coordinating efforts to hold bigger demonstrations next week.

### Strike by Uruguayan bus drivers presses demand for vaccination

Members of Uruguay's 1,000-strong Syndical Association of Cooperativists and Transport Workers (Ascot) began a partial strike to demand priority for vaccinations. The strike of the urban and suburban drivers followed the death of a fellow worker from COVID-19. Drivers drove their buses to the Ministry of Public Health but did not leave their vehicles or take on any riders.

The ministry refused to accede to their demand, excluding them as a prioritized group from health personnel, police, the military and educators, declaring that the drivers would be vaccinated as members of the general population “in their age range.”

### **Guyanese sugar workers protest for resumption of wage talks**

Sugar workers picketed the Uitvlugt Estate in West Coast Demerara, Guyana April 16 to demand the resumption of wage negotiations by the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) with their union, the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU). Workers carried signs declaring, “Workers generate industry wealth,” and “Let us settle pay rise and move on together!” along with other slogans.

GuySuCo had told the GAWU in early March that it would make known its position on its wage offers for 2019-21 by the end of the month. After receiving no such communication, GAWU sent a letter to the company on April 9, but the company did not even acknowledge receiving the correspondence.

In a press release, GAWU denounced GuySuCo’s “disrespectful” attitude to the workers and the union. It referenced GuySuCo’s boasts of “massive investments in the fields and factories, but there is no such exuberance when it comes to addressing the plight of the workers.”

For at least a decade, GuySuCo has used its economic woes and consequent restructuring to shut down estates, freezing wages and laying off workers, who have held numerous strikes and protests in response. In addition to the Uitvlugt Estate, workers have protested at Albion and Blairmont in recent weeks.

### **California nurses conduct two-day strike over wages**

Some 155 nurses at Barton Memorial Hospital in South Lake Tahoe, California staged a two-day strike starting April 16 to call attention to the fact they have been without a contract since they joined the California Nurses Association (CNA) in 2017. Nurses are striking over patient safety, under-staffing, wages and benefits.

Nurses voted by a 97 percent margin to strike. Management has offered a four-year contract offer containing a 17 percent wage increase. Nurses are calling for a 23 percent increase in an attempt to catch up with the median wage for California nurses. The current wages are not enough for them to live in the South Tahoe area due to the high cost of living.

The hospital’s refusal to come to terms is doubly aggravating given the sacrifices made by nurses during the last year of the pandemic. According to the union, 13 percent of the hospital’s nurses left the workforce during the last year. While ignoring the welfare of nurses, Barton has increased the compensation for company CEO Clint Purvance to over \$750,000 as of 2019.

The CNA twice called one-day strikes in 2019. The current two-day strike, which isolates nurses from the hundreds of thousands of health care workers, follows the pattern of actions that serve more to harmlessly release the pent-up anger of nurses than to effect any change on the part of hospital management.

### **Pandemic, low pay pushing exodus of museum workers**

A survey published by the American Alliance of Museums documents that one-fifth of museum workers and students do not expect to remain in the field three years from now. The survey further reveals that 25 percent of workers were out of work during the pandemic and another 40 percent saw their incomes fall.

Real wages during the pandemic amounted to just 30 percent of normal salaries. Independent consultants and contractors had their contracts canceled or suspended.

While many of the 726,000 museum workers take up this field due to the inspiring nature of the museums’ subjects, the survey found 57 percent of workers suffered burnout, while another 59 percent cited low pay as factors forcing them to consider leaving.

### **Quebec teachers fight for new contracts**

Over 100,000 teachers in Quebec are fighting for smaller class sizes, more support for students with disabilities, a wage increase and improved working conditions in new contracts. Teachers in Quebec are the lowest paid in Canada. The provincial government Treasury Board is offering a 5 percent wage increase over three years which, when inflation is factored in, will do nothing to address the compensation issue.

Although the teachers’ unions have a strike mandate, the union bureaucracy has organized only token resistance. Last week, teachers in some areas of the province were called out by their unions for a token work stoppage that impacted about 90 minutes of the working day. During the brief action a car driven by an irate parent deliberately hit one teacher in Sherbrooke. Another similar work stoppage aiming to impact only the last hour of the working day on April 27 has also been called. Union officials called the tactic “innovative” as it was not designed to seriously disrupt school operations.

The so-called job action, however, was clearly designed to blow off a bit of steam amongst the union membership. By week’s end, the *Federation autonome de l’enseignement*, which represents about 50,000 teachers across the province, announced that it will recommend a tentative agreement to the membership in ratification meetings to be held over the next several weeks. It does not appear that the deal addresses the demands of the teachers. The move comes as dockworkers in the Port of Montreal begin weekend strikes in response to management’s ending of weekend pay premiums as part of a long-running contract dispute.



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