Buenos Aires teachers strike against return to in-person classes

Workers Struggles: The Americas

26 April 2021

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

Buenos Aires teachers strike against return to in-person classes

Members of the Education Workers Union (UTE) and Medium and Superior Teaching Association (Ademys) held the fifth day of a strike on April 23 in Buenos Aires opposing the return to in-person instruction.

The UTE claimed that only five percent of teachers were engaged in in-person instruction. In a press release, it denounced the Buenos Aires government for "not respecting sanitary measures for protecting health" in the midst of a second wave of the pandemic. It also blasted a local court ruling that overruled a decree ordering virtual instruction for two weeks due to a surge in COVID-19 infections.

Educators say there is no reason to put children's and professors' health in danger as Buenos Aires experiences a "brutal" increase in COVID-19 cases, especially impacting children younger than 10.

Chilean Congress pension withdrawal vote highlights crisis of Piñera government

On April 23 Chile's Congress voted overwhelmingly—119 to 17 with three abstentions—to allow citizens to withdraw a portion of their pensions in response to the suffering millions of Chileans are facing as the pandemic continues to ravage the nation. It was the third time that the legislature has approved withdrawals from the private Pension Fund Administrators (AFP) system in response to the crisis gripping the country.

Before the vote, Chile's billionaire President Sebastián Piñera repeated his opposition to the legislation and said that he would challenge it in the courts. His declarations were met with nationwide protests, and his feigned concern for the well-being of the working class was justifiably derided. Most members of the right-wing Chile Vamos coalition defied his orders and voted for the motion.

The AFPs, brainchild of the free market "Chicago Boys," were established during the Pinochet dictatorship. They have brought fabulous profits to the companies administering the funds while providing little—on the average around US$315 a month—to those Chilean workers who contribute to the system. Those who have worked in the low-wage informal, temporary and part-time sectors fare even worse and often have to keep working into their 60s and 70s due meager pensions. Meanwhile, the police and military have significantly better retirement packages.

The pension legislation will provide at best a temporary respite for the working class while the ruling class continues its drive toward dictatorship.

Guyanese sugar workers continue strikes and protests for wage increases

Angered by years of foot-dragging on overdue wage increases, sugar cane growing, harvesting and processing estate workers in Guyana have engaged in protests and strikes in recent months. On April 19, factory and field workers struck the Blairmont and Albion estates operated by the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) to press for wage increases promised in 2019.

The workers have not had a raise since 2014. In 2020, GuySuCo agreed to a five percent retroactive increase for 2019 and further discussions with the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU) regarding 2020. The CEO told GAWU reps at a March 9 meeting that he would discuss the increase with the government and get back to the union by the end of the month, a promise he did not keep.

The majority of workers at the two estates—2,488 out of 3,477—opted to strike, while other estates were the object of pickets. Workers belonging to the National Association of Commercial and Industrial Employees (NACIE) did not participate in the strike since, according to a *Guyana Times* report, "Those employees say they do not think they are getting the kind of support they should from their Union."

GAWU and GuySuCo have traded recriminations while the government has declared that it does not "interfere" in labor-management conflicts. On April 24, the government approved a retroactive pay hike for 2019 of five percent of six months' earnings for 2019.

The GAWU said that the payments would be disbursed "soon." In the meantime, the union and GuySuCo have set up a meeting for May 4.

Antigua and Barbuda: Hospital workers strike for payment of risk allowance

Nurses and other health care workers at the Mount St. John's Medical Centre (MSJMC) in St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda walked out last week to demand overdue risk allowances adding up to 3.7 million East Caribbean dollars (US$1.37 million). On April 19, over 70 nurses and other workers protested to demand resolution of the problem. The last payment, about 1.96 million East Caribbean dollars (US$725,500), was made in March 2020.

MSJMC administration claimed that the funds are the government's responsibility and that the medical centre is doing "everything we can" while having to “face challenges” and “make very tough decisions regarding escalating health care costs and all of the other pressures associated with operating a health care facility especially during this time.”

Protesting nurses countered that management continues to hire new people and voiced disgust at the disrespect meted out to them.

Following a meeting on April 21, Joan Peters, president of the Antigua and Barbuda Public Service Association, told workers that MSJMC has promised to pay the overdue risk allowance by the end of April and ordered them back to work.

Haitian teachers strike to protest crime, insecurity

Teachers in Haiti struck from April 19 to 23 to demand action against rampant violence. A group called Referans (for Group of Fundamental Teachers for Renovated Education through New and Solidarity Actions) issued the strike call. The demand was for the government of Jovenel Moïse to take measures to create a climate of security.

The strike call followed the murder of a teacher on his way to work the week before in a suburb of Port-au-Prince and takes place amid a rash of gang violence, including rapes, armed attacks and kidnappings. One of the demands of the strike was the release of a dozen people kidnapped on April 11 by a local gang.

Teachers have also held protests to demand the distribution of debit cards promised by the government and never delivered, official recognition of teachers, payment of overdue salaries and raises. Students have protested to demand the right to an education and have accused the US-backed Moïse of financing violent gangs.

Belizean public workers protest proposed wage cuts

Teachers in Belize held protest actions against a proposed cut in their wages being debated in the national legislature. Early on the morning of April 19, some teachers, members of the Belize National Teachers Union (BNTU), drove their cars onto the Haulover Bridge, which spans the Belize River, stopped and blocked traffic. Similar traffic blockages took place in other areas of the country.

The next day, the Public Service Union (PSU) members joined by BNTU members marched around the old capital, Belize City, during their lunch break. On April 22, the first day of the fiscal year 2021-2022 budget debates, the PSU and BNTU were joined by the Nurses Association of Belize and the National Trade Union Congress of Belize (NTUCB) at the periphery of the National Assembly Building. Due to COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings—with contingents of police ostensibly there to enforce them—the crowd was modest, wearing masks and social distancing.

The government of Prime Minister Johnny Briceño claims that austerity measures are needed to get the nation’s fiscal house in order, but the NTUCB, unions and “good governance” organizations blame corruption for the fix that Belize is in. They also say that taking 80 million Belizean dollars (US$40 million) out of circulation in the country of around 420,000 would cripple the economy.

The BNTU informed the Ministry of Education April 23 that it would go on strike April 26, and union officials said that they would stay out as long as necessary.

Exxon issues lockout notice at Texas refinery

Exxon Mobil issued a lockout notice to workers at its Beaumont, Texas refinery after the company and United Steelworkers Local 13-243 failed to come to an agreement on April 23. The lockout will commence on May 1.

Exxon complained that the union would not submit its latest contract proposal to workers after weeks of negotiations, and the union has declined to comment on the status of negotiations. In a statement to KFDM/Fox 4, Local 12-243 President Darrell Kyle simply said that “our issues are very complex,” and neither side would divulge its negotiating positions.

No doubt the present deadlock involves concession demands that would provoke opposition from the 600 workers involved in the current stalemate.

The previous six-year contract at the Beaumont plant expired on February 1. That agreement was to cover a period in which Exxon would add a 250,000 bpd (barrel-per-day) distillation unit that would increase the refinery’s capacity to 619,000 bpd. However, the pandemic has slowed the process on the expansion and now it is not expected to be completed until 2023.

Workers strike two Missouri distribution plants after four-year wage freeze

Some 24 workers at N.H. Scheppers Distributing plants in Columbia and Jefferson City, Missouri walked off the job April 19 after almost four months of negotiations failed to provide workers with the wage demands they were seeking. Four years ago, Teamsters Local 833 pushed through a concessions agreement and wage freeze after the company’s revenues fell off.

Scheppers claims the current wage proposal is the “highest offer in the history of the company.” But clearly, after a four-year freeze, it is not mollifying workers. Scheppers distributes beer, wine and other nonalcoholic beverages across mid-Missouri.

Looming threat of strike wave against Connecticut nursing home industry

Fearing rising militancy among chronically underpaid staff, a Connecticut nursing home association projects that the state could see strikes at some 52 of its assisted living facilities in the next period. Matt Barrett, CEO of Connecticut Association of Health Care Facilities/Connecticut Center for Assisted Living, fears, “We would have in Connecticut a very different type of public health emergency on our hands if we were to have a large-scale labor action.”

Barrett said he worried that nursing home owners might find it difficult to find replacement workers to withstand a major wave of strikes. The financial situation of nursing homes has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Current occupancy rates are at 73.4 percent, down from 87 percent in January 2020. Both figures are under Medicare and Medicaid Services recommendations that nursing home facilities maintain a 95 percent occupancy rate.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) held informational pickets on April 14 at several nursing homes announcing workers’ demands for a $20 an hour wage, better health care insurance and increased personal protective equipment. The union is seeking state support for increased Medicaid reimbursements to bail out the owners.

British Columbia gas plant strike in second month

Energy workers at the Canadian Natural Resources Ltd. (CNRL) liquefied natural gas processing plant at Chetwynd in northeastern British Columbia are in the second month of a strike for a new contract. Members of the Unifor union, the workers are demanding a settlement that reflects wage and benefit provisions in the national energy pattern agreement. The company's rejected offer falls well below industry standards.

CNRL has made a $7.5 billion profit over the past three years on the backs of its workers. The company is the largest natural gas producer in Canada and a major energy player on the international market.

The dispute follows a watershed struggle by 750 oil refinery workers at the Regina, Saskatchewan Federated Cooperatives Ltd. facility last year. That almost seven-month lockout was the opening shot among energy employers across the country in an effort to shred benefit provisions, pensions and working conditions.

Employing scab replacements, police and ultraright-wing gang violence and with the full-scale backing of the courts and the provincial government, FCL was able to impose massive concessions. Over the course of the dispute, Unifor insisted on keeping the struggle bottled up within narrow collective bargaining parameters even as the company employed every political measure against them. Ultimately isolated and virtually left to starve on the picket line, the workers were roundly defeated.