

Manitoba nurses vote for strike; Argentine protesters hit with tear gas

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

Buenos Aires protest demanding wages, food and vaccines hit with tear gas

A group of protesters in the city of Buenos Aires held a march and demonstration to demand “decent wages, work, food assistance and vaccinations” on June 11. As they attempted to cross a bridge, they were tear-gassed by Argentine Naval Prefecture (PNA) units.

The protesters consisted of members of various social organizations and leftist parties, as well as unemployed and outsourced workers. According to a press release, some of the workers had performed essential work repairing electrical systems, and “were obligated to work all through the pandemic and when they demanded permanent positions they were illegally fired.”

The protesters assembled in the morning at the headquarters of the Labor and Social Development Ministries and marched to the Pueyrredón Bridge that spans the Matanzas River. They were met by PNA forces, who used tear gas in an attempt to block their passage and prevent them from crossing.

Uruguayan bus drivers plan strike for higher pay

The National Transport Workers Union of Uruguay, which is affiliated with the Pit-Cnt federation, reaffirmed June 10 its intention to call out bus drivers June 17 under the slogan “Against hunger and inequality, for work and wages.” This will be the first general strike against the right-wing administration of National Party President Luis Lacalle Pou.

The strike had been decided on at a Pit-Cnt representative board meeting on May 13, but the vote came under fire from critics claiming that it would interfere with vaccinations for nearly 50 percent of Uruguayans. National Party members, who had previously downplayed the need for lockdowns and other preventive measures in favor of “personal freedom,” slammed the strike call for its “insensitivity” and “irresponsibility.”

One National Party senator claimed that at least 48,000 people would be deprived of scheduled vaccinations. At the same time, other opponents of the strike lamented that it would prevent workers from getting to their

workplaces, i.e., among the main COVID-19 transmission sites.

Pit-Cnt President Fernando Pereira and other bureaucrats have said that, in accordance with a formula worked out with the Uruguayan Health Federation, “there will be transportation for vaccinations,” but “only for vaccination sites.” He added that transportation for urgent care, emergency cases and cancer patients will also be guaranteed.

Chilean hospital workers block beds to demand days off, pay

Workers at the Barros Luco Hospital in the San Miguel municipality of Santiago, Chile blocked access to 27 beds last week to press their demands regarding working conditions and better pay. The workers, members of the National Health Workers Federation, have been prohibited from taking vacations, administrative days and paid holidays since the pandemic began.

The workers have been laboring under pressure, with high numbers of patients and long hours. There are not sufficient staff for the number of patients, with three workers—formerly there were six—for every 48 beds. On June 4, workers met with management to request the use of legal holidays, vacation days and administrative leave and that no more beds be opened until there were enough personnel. These were the main requests, but there were others.

Management sent out an internal memo stating that the requests would be evaluated. Management later granted some of their requests, but left others unanswered or unclarified. Among those were the precarious nature of the work and the frequent lack of hot water for patients.

United States

Steelworkers strike Unifrax outside Buffalo, New York

Some 180 workers in Tonawanda near Buffalo, New York, members of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 4-2058 are continuing a strike they began in May at the automotive high temperature ceramic fiber insulation maker Unifrax. Rather than calling for a wider mobilization in support of the striking workers, the USW has been aiding the strikebreaking maneuvers of the company, which is attempting to replace the strikers with scabs. The main sticking points in the dispute are wages, benefits, and the two-tier wage system.

The earlier contract between Unifrax and the union had expired at the

end of January. Workers voted to grant strike authorization after the company made its final offer at the end of February by 133 to 23, or 85 percent voting in favor. However, instead of calling a strike, the USW kept the workers at their posts for months afterwards.

The company is headquartered in Niagara Falls, New York, and has around 2,700 employees at 37 manufacturing facilities in 12 countries. Private equity fund Clearlake Capital Group, L.P., with \$30 billion in assets, has a controlling interest in Unifrax. The company has for years reaped the benefits of publicly subsidized power provided by the New York Power Authority from the Niagara Power Project.

An indication of the conditions at Unifrax was given on the Indeed.com job search engine, where a majority of workers left unfavorable reviews. One stated, “As an operator you are driven into the ground and every week they make your job more difficult. On nearly a monthly basis they add more tasks and responsibilities while actually taking away raises and benefits!” The worker had no positive remarks for the company or union, adding that the company had, “suspended 401k, suspended raises, more responsibility while compensated less, no HR representation, no union representation.”

Workers at Corinth, Mississippi plant return to work after contract is extended in labor dispute

Over 100 workers will return to their jobs June 14 at the Mississippi Polymers plant in Corinth, Mississippi after a dispute with the United Steelworkers (USW) led the company to close its doors. The two sides exchanged accusations after the old agreement expired at midnight June 4.

Management accused the union of sending text messages and voicemails to workers with picket line assignments and preparing to initiate a strike at noon on June 5. The union denies the charge and called the company’s actions a lockout.

According to USW Local 759L, workers voted down a company contract proposal that attacked job security and made significant changes to workers’ health care coverage. A federal mediator met with both Mississippi Polymers and the USW over a two-day period to broker an extension of the old contract while the union and the company prepare to return to the bargaining table. Mississippi Polymers operates a single plant that manufactures flexible films that are used by other manufacturers to protect and enhance surfaces.

Teachers in Flint, Michigan walk out of elementary school over excess heat

A large group of teachers walked out of Doyle Ryder Elementary School in Flint Michigan on June 7 as air conditioning broke down and temperatures inside the building soared to over 90 degrees Fahrenheit. An HVAC company repaired the air-conditioning and the following day temperatures in the building were lowered. No students were in the building as the school is continuing virtual learning.

United Teachers of Flint president Karen Christian praised the school district, claiming, “The district was very quick to action to help handle the situation, and those teachers that walked out, no repercussions to them...” But the conditions in Flint schools in terms of air conditioning have been so bad that the district finally agreed to put air conditioning in eight of the district’s buildings. But there are two schools that will not get air

conditioning under the plan.

The United Teachers union is currently in contract talks with the district and the old agreement expired back in August of 2020. In May, the union filed an unfair labor practices charge against the district, claiming Flint Community Schools was engaged in regressive bargaining.

Canada

Manitoba Nurses vote to strike

With almost a 100 percent membership turnout, about 12,000 Manitoba nurses overwhelmingly voted in support of a province-wide strike. The nurses have been without a contract for four years. Issues surrounding the recruitment and retention of nurses, intricately tied up with substandard working conditions, staffing levels and compensation, have lain unaddressed since 2017 and straight through the pandemic, which continues to impact the province.

Government negotiators have stonewalled discussions on a new contract as they have done with other public sector workers seeking new deals. In 2017, Premier Brian Pallister and his Conservatives passed Bill 28, which imposed a two-year wage freeze on all public employees with a meager 0.75 percent wage increase in year three of any new contract, followed by one percent in year four. Public sector workers throughout the province rejected the wage restraint fiat as unconstitutional.

Last June, a provincial court, calling the bill “draconian,” struck down the legislation as an infringement on the constitutional right to free collective bargaining. However, the government immediately appealed the decision, insisting that public sector employers must follow the wage restraint targets outlined in the original legislation in all contract negotiations.

Since then, thousands of workers have taken strike action at the province’s hydroelectric Crown Corporation and amongst Winnipeg school bus drivers. But these job actions have not been designed by the various union leaderships to unite workers throughout the province to defeat the Pallister government’s dictates through militant strike action, but to dissipate worker anger. The aim is to channel workers into a byzantine legal maze designed to strangle workers’ demands.

A provincial law mandates that after 60 days of even minimal job actions, an individual union’s dispute can be referred to the Manitoba Labour Board for binding arbitration.

Already hydro and bus drivers have ended job actions and lined up for hearings before the pro-management Board. Nurses’ leader Darlene Jackson has signaled her desire for a similar result should negotiations continue to stagnate. In effect, as at the recently scuttled strike at Manitoba Hydro, short and small rotating job actions targeting only nonessential activities must be continued for 60 days to qualify for an application for a Labour Board hearing. But even this dubious avenue for a “compromise” resolution of labour disputes is too much for the Pallister government. It is preparing a new Bill for an early autumn passage that would delete the 60-day provision for binding arbitration from the Labour Code.



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