Alberta meatpackers take strike vote; Uruguayan teachers hold 24-hour work stoppage

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Uruguayan teachers unions call 24-hour work stoppages over job security, programs, pay

Teachers in Montevideo, Canelones and Rocha departments in Uruguay struck for one day, November 5, to protest cuts in their teaching hours and reformulations of programs without prior consultations with the Labor University of Uruguay Functionaries Association (AFUTU).

The teachers gathered in the UTU courtyard in the city of Montevideo where teachers voiced their fears about job insecurity and program cutbacks.

The one-day actions will be rotated among the various departments. On November 8, Maldonado and Treinta y Tres departments were scheduled to stop work.

Also on November 5, the Sintep private school teachers' union announced a one-day strike for November 10. According to a Sintep communique, colleges, Infant and Family Attention Centers, technical training institutes and others will participate in the work stoppage.

"This strike is given in the necessary framework for the realization of a General Assembly" in which "a collective assessment of the negotiation situation" can be made of the current round of the Salary Councils. The assembly will also seek to define "the steps to take to continue defending work, salaries and labor rights."

Colombian teachers strike and protest over pay delay

The Association of Institutes of Antioquia in Colombia (Adida) announced on November 1 that some 30,000 teachers in the department were still owed their salaries for October and called for a strike and protest actions until the situation is rectified. The only municipality in which teachers' wages were up to date was Bello, a suburb of the departmental capital, Medellín.

The Ministry of Education claimed that the delays were due to problems with the computer system, but this has been a recurring problem; in fact, last month similar issues prevented some regions from paying their teachers, but others not.

Teachers were instructed by Adida to show up at their work sites November 3, but not to work until payments were verified. The union also called for demonstrations and a traffic blockade in Medellín November 4 and 5.

Trinidadian fried chicken delivery drivers stay at home over new salary plans

Delivery drivers for fast-food franchise KFC in Trinidad and Tobago did not show up for work on October 31 and November 1 after being informed of a new pay arrangement devised by Prestige Holdings, the delivery service operator. The drivers had formed a WhatsApp group to communicate. When the word spread of the new pay scheme, the majority, 157 of the drivers, stayed home.

Managers at Prestige had received an internal memo that increased the delivery charge from 15 to 20 Trinidadian dollars (TT$), or from US$2.21 to US$2.95. Pay for drivers per delivery will increase from TT$10 to TT$18 (US$1.48 to $2.66). However, the company will no longer pay the TT$20 (US$2.95) hourly gas allowance, an effective pay cut.

One driver, who requested anonymity, told the *Trinidad Express* that with the new arrangement, his daily earnings were likely to fall from about TT$250 (US$37) to TT$150-200 (US$22-29). Not only do drivers have to maintain their vehicles out of pocket, but they have endured incidents of robberies and violence. Some are already looking for new jobs, according to the report. Those remaining are considering further protest actions.

Mexican teachers blockading tracks for overdue pay removed by security forces

Units of the Mexican National Guard and state police in Michoacán, Mexico removed teachers blockading rail tracks on October 31. The teachers, members of the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE), had been blockading tracks in municipalities of Caltzontzin since July 31 and Pátzcuaro since September.

The train routes lead to the port of Lázaro Cárdenas, and the blockades snarled the transport of goods to and from there. Business organizations have clamored for ending the strike, with the Chamber of the Transformation Industry of Nuevo León press release declaring, "The free movement of goods and people is a fundamental human, economic and social right in Mexico."

The statement did not mention the right to be paid for one's labor. The educators took the action to demand the payment of wages to over 28,000 teachers in the state. They had not received five fortnightly payments,

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known as quincenas, as well as bonuses and retroactive raises. By October 1, the Finance and other ministries had paid three of the quincenas, about 3.82 billion pesos (US$188 million), but the teachers maintained the blockades to press for complete delivery of their wages and bonuses.

After the state government informed the CNTE that it was going to remove the teachers, the union called for the teachers to end the blockades, and there were no reported incidents as the security forces cleared the tracks. The teachers are still owed raises and bonuses, and they also want job stability for teacher trainees. There was a strategy meeting on November 3.

Strikes at two Ohio medical waste plants continue

Teamsters at two biomedical waste management plants in Toledo and Warren, Ohio continue to walk picket lines without any indication management is going to back off their demands for concessions.

The 20 workers at the Toledo plant, on strike now for one month, are opposing the company's action earlier this year before contract expiration to impose a 60/40 medical plan with a $13,000 deductible. The earlier plan had been an 80/20 match with a $6,000 deductible.

Another 50 workers at the Warren plant, who struck just a few days after the Toledo workers, are fighting for significant wage and benefit increases. Negotiations at both plants are going nowhere.

Stericycle workers at other locations held a protest in front of the company's headquarters in Chicago, Illinois. The Teamsters union issued a press release indicating that strikes "could expand to other parts of the country in weeks to come."

Far from indicating that the Teamsters bureaucracy is going on the offensive, the press release exposes the fact that the union has been isolating the Ohio strikers and holding back the ranks at other plants while the company is bringing in strikebreakers at the Ohio facilities.

Meanwhile, the union is hoping to spread illusions that the company can be pressured to make concessions through playing up phony statements of support from Democrats like Ohio Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown.

The current strikes in Ohio are already causing a backup of COVID-19-infected waste at hospitals in the Great Lakes region. The union has confirmed there are several Stericycle facilities across the United States with a number serving hospitals in New York state. Stericycle operates at 640 locations in 21 different countries.

Louisiana sanitation workers strike over wages and working conditions

Dozens of sanitation workers in Metairie, Louisiana, walked off the job November 5 to protest the attempt by Republic Services to cut wages for high-seniority workers and register complaints over management's failure to underwrite the maintenance of equipment. The workers, members of Teamsters Local 270, want wages to be equivalent to workers at other area sanitation companies.

Workers who have 30 years seniority have hit a ceiling of $20.66 an hour while other companies have starting wages in the $25 to $26 dollar range. Workers are also upset over the lack of Personal Protective Equipment. In addition, a sign on the picket line charged, "Our Insurance is Trash."

The condition of garbage trucks is "hell on wheels," Robert Williams, a maintenance worker at Republic, told WGNO. "We're underpaid. Trucks [are] constantly breaking. I'm a one-man gang in the morning, I handle all these trucks, by myself."

Republic Services is the second largest waste disposal company by revenue in the United States. Its President, Jon Vander Ark made over $4 million in 2019.

New York dairy processing workers strike over health care benefits

About 250 workers at the Friendship Dairies' plant in Friendship, New York, went on strike November 3 over increased health care demands by management. Members of Teamsters Local 264 voted unanimously the previous day charging that the increase in health care costs will result in a pay cut.

Workers are indignant that the parent company, Saputo, raked in $11.5 billion in revenues last year and another $3.7 billion in revenues for the quarter ending last September.

Dawn Freeman, a 28-year veteran at the plant and a member of the bargaining unit declared, "The company told us that they went above and beyond during the pandemic, but they did nothing for 250 people. We got no raises, no incentives and what they're proposing now is a slap in the face. We're not here to get rich. We're here to survive, but with this proposal we can't even do that."

Based in Canada, Saputo commands 67 manufacturing facilities worldwide, has 18,000 employees and ranks tenth among dairy processors. In Australia, it is ranked first in dairy and in Argentina it holds second place.

Strike looms at giant Cargill meatpacking plant in Alberta

Workers voted last week by 97 percent to strike unless a contract settlement is quickly reached at Cargill's High River, Alberta meatpacking plant. The plant employs over 2,000 workers, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). The facility slaughters and packages about 40 percent of all beef processed in the country. The meatpackers have been without a contract for over a year. If negotiations this week do not produce a tentative settlement, a strike could begin by the weekend. Workers are seeking improvement to health and safety procedures, higher wages and an improved process for job movement inside the plant.

The High River plant gained notoriety in the early stages of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 when it recorded the largest single localized outbreak in North America, with about one half of all employees testing positive for the coronavirus. In addition, another 600 close contacts of the meatpackers in surrounding towns also contracted the virus. About eighty percent of Cargill production employees are low-wage immigrant workers from the Philippines, Vietnam and China.

Infamously, after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020, no preventative inspection of the Cargill plant was undertaken by health or labour authorities even after workers began to fall sick. When an inspection was finally done on April 15, the assigned official did not even enter the main part of the shop floor, scandalously preferring instead to stay outside the facility and inspect it via a FaceTime app. The facility was given a clean bill of health. Days later, one worker had already died from the illness and 7 more sent to intensive care.

This forced a two-week closure of the plant. However, with workers reluctant to return to work, local union president Thomas Hesse was keen

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to reassure the company that no work stoppages would be organized. “We are looking at legal options. We are not asking for a work stoppage. A work stoppage would not be legal,” he said. Production was then re-started.

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