

Protests in Ecuador against right-wing government; families press lawsuit against Tyson Foods over COVID deaths

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Unions, social and indigenous groups announce nationwide protests against Ecuadoran president's policies

A coalition of union, indigenous and social groups in Ecuador announced January 5 that it would hold protests against the policies of right-wing President Guillermo Lasso on the 19th. The national protest, the first for 2022, will demand solutions to the high price of fuel, changes in labor policy and the payment of the government's debt with the Ecuadorian Social Security Institute (IESS).

Lasso, who succeeded Lenín Moreno in May, is a free marketeer who calls for tax cuts, privatization, weakening of labor laws and subservience to IMF dictates. He is a close ally of the US and right-wing regional governments in their attempts to isolate and strangle Venezuela and Cuba. He even invited US-supported reactionary presidential pretender Juan Guaidó of Venezuela, instead of president Nicolás Maduro, to his inauguration.

Lasso accuses critics of his policies of fomenting violence and seeking to destabilize the country. Their retort is that widespread poverty, nonpayment of pensions, IMF restructuring and unequal provision of anti-COVID measures as well as other policies against the working class, retirees and poor are the real violence.

Mexican teachers go on indefinite strike for payment of bonuses

On January 3, teachers in Section 15 of the National Education Workers Syndicate (SNTE) launched an indefinite strike in the Mexican state of Hidalgo. The strike was called to press the demand for the payment of end-of-year bonuses for retired educators and working teachers.

The week before, retired teachers communicated via Whatsapp that they had not received their bonus of about 6,000 pesos (US\$294), with some calling for a strike and street blockades.

In a press release, SNTE declared itself "in total strike of virtual and face-to-face activities as of January 3 at all educational levels until all pending labor and economic issues are resolved." Some 44,000

teachers, administrators and support staff joined the walkout.

The situation is further complicated by the spread of the Omicron variant. The Ministry of Health (SSa) had previously said that face-to-face and staggered classes would resume after the holidays, "as long as epidemiological conditions allow it," to be evaluated on January 17. However, contrary to previous SSa claims that there were no cases of the variant in the state, at least five cases of Omicron infection were reported by January 2, and the numbers have climbed since.

Jamaican university lecturers strike over pay and benefit dispute

About 800 lecturers at the University of the West Indies (UWI) in Mona, Jamaica voted last week to strike to demand payments due them. The lecturers are represented by the West Indies Group of University Teachers (WIGUT).

Academic, senior administrative and professional staff resolved not to attend meetings or participate in activities involving the resumption of instruction when the semester begins January 17. They also have refused to upload grades for examinations.

The union had met with the UWI administration on December 20, but negotiations ended in a stalemate. The union and the principal scheduled to resume talks on January 10. WIGUT has proposed a mere 4 percent raise, in line with other public-sector unions. Benefits will also be discussed, though UWI has been tight-lipped about its proposals. WIGUT has asked the Jamaican government to intervene.

Nurses in Barbados strike, protest over pay delays and working conditions

Nurses at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital (QEH) in Bridgetown, Barbados have held several actions recently to press their demands. The main demand of the nurses, who are represented by the Unity Workers Union (UWU), is for immediate payment of their salaries, which are often delayed for months at a time. Other demands include higher pay, improvements in working conditions, health insurance, better nurse-to-patient ratios, extra pay for degrees, opportunities for advancement and continuous training and professional development.

The UWU was scheduled to meet with the Minister of Health and

Wellness on December 24, but at the last minute he demanded that the nurses return to work first, so the meeting fell through. Since then, nurses have called in sick or refused to work. On January 6, both working and retired nurses marched down streets in Bridgetown to Golden Square Freedom Park, where they held signs and chanted.

The administration at QEH has downplayed the nurses' actions, claiming that absences over the end-of-year holidays are "within the expected norm," as QEH executive director Juliette Bynoe-Sutherland told reporters. Nonetheless, continuing shortages in various wards have compelled management to call in retired nurses and shuffle assignments around.

QEH, meanwhile, claims that the bargaining units at the hospital are the National Union of Public Workers (NUPW) and the Barbados Nurses Association, and the UWU has no standing to represent the nurses. The UWU has called for further protest actions if their demands are not addressed.

Colombian bus drivers block roads to protest restructuring

Bus drivers for the Integrated Public Transport System (SITP) in the Colombian town of Usme, a locality south of Bogotá, held a protest January 6, in some locales blockading streets with their buses. The drivers protested the dismantling by the city's TransMilenio public transit system of several routes that they have served due to the new buses the government is putting into operation.

The Ministry of Mobility has couched the dismantling of 36 "provisional" routes to more remote areas of the capital in terms of low-emission technology and adding electric vehicles to its fleets. Most of the drivers serving those routes complain that not only will they be deprived of income, but the lives workers who ride the buses to get to work will be made more difficult by the scrapping of these routes.

One driver, in an interview with W Radio, decried the reorganization as "the Christmas gift from the mayor Claudia López," and claimed that "she took advantage of the fact that people were on vacation and withdrew all the routes of the provisional leaving people without transport and us without work."

At some spots, police and Mobile Anti-Disturbances Squadron forces arrived to prevent protesters from advancing and used cranes to remove the buses blocking the roads. The night before, a protest of young people in Usme against a TransMilenio fare increase ended with a riot in one neighborhood.

Federal court blocks Tyson from taking cases involving worker deaths out of state courts

The US Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit blocked the giant meat processor Tyson Foods from moving several lawsuits over the deaths of Iowa meatpackers due to COVID-19 from state courts to the federal judiciary December 30. Tyson has been charged with gross negligence in the deaths of four meatpackers at the company's pork processing plant in Waterloo, Iowa.

The families of the four workers charge that Tyson disregarded

safety guidelines, did not provide sufficient personal protective equipment, pressured infected workers to come to work, and transferred workers suspected of infection between plants. Most egregious was the fact that supervisors at the Waterloo plant placed bets on the number of workers who would die from the coronavirus.

Tyson sought to move the cases from state court to the federal court to take cover under the April 2020 executive order signed by then-president Donald Trump that declared meatpacking essential infrastructure. At that time, Trump stated, "We're going to sign an executive order... that will solve any liability problems... We're working with Tyson, which is one of the big companies in the world."

The Eighth Circuit Court decision pointed out that some of the deaths occurred before Trump signed his executive order. At the Waterloo plant, over 1,000 workers contracted COVID-19 by May 7, 2020. A total of six would die. Across Iowa, over 6,000 workers at 26 meatpacking plants were infected with the virus resulting in 19 deaths.

Faculty strike at the Concordia University of Edmonton

Eighty-two professors, lab instructors, librarians and placement coordinators went on strike on January 4 to demand that the private university address grievously low pay scales and increasing workloads and withdraw administration attacks on intellectual property rights and job security. The strike at Alberta's Concordia University of Edmonton (COE) is the first strike at a private post-secondary institution in the history of the province.

The strikers, members of the university's Faculty Association, rank as the 68th lowest paid faculty out of 70 Canadian universities, with pay gaps reaching \$10,825 for assistant and \$49,500 for full-time faculty among universities of a similar student body size. Faculty are demanding the large wage gap be steadily reduced. They note that private universities are not bound by the right-wing government of Premier Jason Kenney's public sector wage restraint program even though university administration has sought to tie wage increases to such guidelines.

At the same time, Concordia recorded a \$20 million operating surplus over the past two years. The administration then squandered \$1.75 million on a local mansion that has virtually no use as an educational resource. The strike at Concordia precedes possible job actions by Faculty Associations at the University of Lethbridge, Mount Royal University and Athabasca University. All are amid stalled contract negotiations.



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