

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

## Protests continue in Peru over onerous rise in living expenses

Protests in Peru against spiraling inflation continued last week. In Cusco, members of various unions and social organizations struck for 48 hours beginning April 18. Train service to the tourist attraction Machu Picchu was halted and roads were blocked.

Among the demands of the protesters are reduction in the prices of fuel, utilities and essential food items. They also have called for a rewriting of the nation's constitution, which heavily favors business interests over those of the working class and poor. Measures by the administration of Pedro Castillo, such as elimination of taxes on essential food and fuel and raising the minimum wage, have not quelled the anger and distrust of the government.

On April 21, the National Assembly of the Agrarian Sector called a strike, alleging, "The Executive Power is kidnapped by the big monopolies and also by the Congress, that do not let [the government] work." Among its demands are an increase in the national budget for the agricultural sector, the dissolution of monopolies and the calling of a constituent assembly.

In the southern Moquegua region, the administration declared a state of emergency April 20 and sent in the army to stop protests against the Cuajone copper mining complex in southern Peru by indigenous residents. The protesters, who accused the mine of not benefiting the surrounding communities and demanding compensation, had blockaded the mine and cut off its water supply. They ended their protest on April 22 after 50 days.

## Transport union in Argentina calls two-day strike for wage parity

The Automotive Tramway Union (UTA) called for a 48-hour strike by short- and medium-distance passenger transport drivers beginning April 26 throughout Argentina's interior. In its April 21 announcement of the stoppage, UTA said that the measure was taken to demand that passenger transport workers in the nation's interior be given the same increase that drivers in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (AMBA) receive.

UTA blamed the various provincial and national departments of the transport sector for the strike call. It claimed that "the National State has been highly assisting a transportation system that is the exclusive responsibility of the provincial governments, who have not only abandoned all areas of joint negotiation but are also unaware of the repeated invitations to participate in salary discussions."

The strike call follows a February suspension of activities in public passenger transport throughout the interior of the country called by the Argentine Federation of Automotive Passenger Transporters (Fatap) due to lack of funds to pay salaries and fuel. Fatap noted at the time that the government had made disbursements for fuel and wages in the AMBA but not in the interior. Weeks later, the federal government delivered the funds for public transport in the interior.

## Panamanian trash collectors strike over pay demands

Workers for the Aguaseo solid waste collection company in the city of Colón, Panama walked off the job April 21 over wage demands. In negotiations with the firm, the Workers' Union of the Aguaseo Company (Sitraseo), proposed a 16 percent wage increase over three years. Aguaseo's proposal is 8 percent over four years.

Sitraseo also has accused Aguaseo of violating labor laws for years, and denounced the firm's rejection of the union's offer to collect waste from hospitals, schools and other sensitive places. The Labor and Labor Development Ministry has submitted the unresolved issues to arbitration.

## Dominican Republic: Protest called over high cost of living, infrastructure and environmental issues

Union and social organizations in the Dominican Republic's Cibao region called a one-day strike for April 25 last week. The Cibao region, made up of 14 northern provinces, is the most populous region in the country, with over 5.6 million inhabitants.

Spokespeople for the Cibao Coalition, which encompasses over 200 popular groups, listed the demands of the protest: a reduction in the price of groceries, fuels and utilities; higher wages for both public and private sector workers; building and improvements of

infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, roads and aqueducts. They also called for an end to construction of two dams that they consider destructive of the environment. They accused the president, Luis Abinader, of serving the interests of millionaires while slighting the social needs of workers and poor people.

### **Pilots at Alaska Airlines to vote for strike authorization as workloads cause stress**

The pilot's union at Alaska Airlines voted to hold a strike authorization ballot in May after three years of failed negotiations, the stress of the pandemic and a pilot shortage that has caused heavy work schedules for the company's 3,100 pilots. The vote will be conducted May 9 through May 25, however, the actual calling of a strike will be in the hands of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA).

Even then, under federal law, a strike would only be permitted after the National Mediation Board (NMB) releases the union from bargaining and the passing of a 30-day cooling-off-period. Alaska Airlines asked for mediation back in October of 2021.

During the Omicron wave of infections, Alaska Airlines, like other airlines, was plagued by infections resulting in flight cancellations. This has been further complicated by a pilot shortage that forced pilots to carry increased workloads.

Disenchantment among airline employees was expressed earlier this month when pilots, along with flight attendants and other airline staff in Anchorage, Los Angeles, Portland, San Francisco and Seattle, staged joint picketing. There were reports of pilots walking off the job to join the protest.

Captain Will McQuillen, who chairs ALPA's Master Executive Council at Alaska Airlines, told KIRO, "The major airlines are poised to hire 8,000 to 10,000 pilots this year alone ... [we're] competing for a scarce resource. Right now, for about the first time in a very, very long time in this industry, pilots have a choice of investing their career almost anywhere they want to. They will gravitate towards an airline that gives them the best opportunity, the best work-life balance, the best job protections for that investment that they're making. We're seeing very clearly in exit interviews that, specifically for Alaska, pilots are leaving for quality-of-life reasons."

However, ALPA is responsible for allowing Alaska Airlines to operate below the industry standard to maintain profitability. As McQuillen put it, "We are looking for improvements to our contract in line with the market but that will also allow our company to grow and remain successful and competitive."

### **Natural gas workers in New York, Pennsylvania authorize strike action over inferior pay and contract language**

Workers in southwest New York and northwest Pennsylvania

voted strike authorization after management for National Fuel Gas declared an impasse in negotiations with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 2154. Members of the IBEW voted on April 8 to reject the company's final offer and a negotiating session on April 11 failed to resolve outstanding issues, leading the company to impose its final offer after the old agreement expired on April 12.

Local 2154 workers who provide natural gas to the southwest New York and northwest Pennsylvania region complain that the contract imposed by the company will still pay them 20 percent less than the same company pays to natural gas workers in surrounding regions.

Another issue of contention is the firing of workers. A press release by the union states, "IBEW Local 2154 wants its members to have protection from being subject to termination without just cause. Currently, the terms National Fuel Gas is imposing on its employees in Northwest Pennsylvania and Southwest New York State eliminates the due process, union representation, and need to present just cause, which employees in neighboring regions are given in disciplinary matters."

National Fuel Gas has \$6.2 billion in assets. In 2021 the company saw a sharp increase in its net income as it skyrocketed upwards by almost 394 percent.

### **Toronto's Union Station train controllers strike**

Ninety-five workers, members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) responsible for train control, signals and communications maintenance went on strike last week at Toronto's main rail hub. The workers oversee the movement of over 300 commuter trains each day as well as freight and passenger trains that traverse the Union Station rail corridor.

Workers have been without a contract since December 2019. In September 2021 they voted down a tentative agreement recommended by their union leadership and Toronto Terminals Railway management. Wages are the key issue in the dispute under conditions where annual inflation now nears 7 percent.

Although management has processes in place to keep trains moving, the strike action has already caused delays in commuter train service. In addition, picketing at the nearby commuter bus station has forced buses to drop their passengers at depots far away from the central station.



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