Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Canada

On Monday morning, members of the Carpenters District Council of Ontario joined strikes by 15,000 high- and low-rise residential home construction labourers, institutional construction labourers and thousands more institution and infrastructure crane operators. Like their brothers and sisters who began their strikes last week, the carpenters are demanding wage increases that address burgeoning inflation across the province, which has reached 6.7 percent and is still growing.

The carpenters voted overwhelmingly last week to reject a miserly offer from their employers. That deal had been recommended to the workers for acceptance by the union leadership. In negotiations with other building trade groups, employers have been offering only 9 percent (or less) spread out over three-year contracts.

The 15,000 carpenters who joined the strike movement Monday work on industrial and commercial projects. Carpenters in the residential sector are not yet on strike. However, 15,000 more residential house framers, forming workers, tile installers and carpenters in the Labourers' International Union of North America Local 183 have ground high- and low-rise residential construction to a halt since last week.

In addition, this past weekend plumbers and pipefitters refused to ratify a proposed settlement with 52.8 percent of the union members rejecting the deal. A strike date has yet to be announced. Bricklayers and Painter's union leaders have recommended recently negotiated deals to their memberships, but ratification votes have not yet taken place.

Employers are holding fast to their contract proposals due to labour laws favourable to them. According to the Ontario Labour Relations Act, strikes in the construction sector in the province can start on May 1 every three years but must end by June 15. Any outstanding disputes are then settled through binding arbitration.

Latin America

Workers for Telmex, Mexico's leading telephone company, voted last week to ratify the decision of the General Assembly of the Telephone Operators Union of the Mexican Republic (STRM) to strike beginning May 11. At the same time, the STRM leadership has repeatedly stressed that its demands are not "irreducible" and that it is open to an "arrangement" to avoid the walkout.

The main demand of the union is for a 7.5 percent raise for both active and retired workers, the latter of whom number nearly 30,000 out of 55,000 members. Telmex's offer is a 4 percent wage raise and a mere 1 percent hike in benefits for active workers, with smaller increases for retirees. Union leader Francisco Hernández Juárez told reporters that STRM wants equal raises for both active and retired workers.

Other union demands include the end of foot-dragging on over 2,000 unfilled vacancies pending since 2017, annual review of the collective bargaining agreement and correction of violations of the contract. STRM and Telmex have been engaged in "dialogue" for over three years without an agreement. STRM has not called a strike since 1985.

Telmex, which was privatized in 1990, is owned by multibillionaire Carlos Slim, Latin America's richest person. Company spokespersons claim that the strike would have little effect, since many functions are now automated.

Members of the Montevideo Secondary Teachers Union (ADES) struck on May 4 over the government's proposed reform agenda. The action included the occupation of the Dámaso Antonio Larrañaga High School and a noon assembly. They were served an eviction order and moved the meeting to the headquarters of the PIT-CIT federation.

At the meeting, a number of issues were discussed: overcrowded classrooms, a salary cut of nearly 8 percent, the loss of positions and education reforms proposed by President Luis Lacalle Pou, which ADES head Emiliano Mandacen asserted would serve to "delegitimize the teachers

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as builders of educational policy."

The assembled called upon the Central Directive Council to convene a meeting to develop its position and establish the scope of negotiations.

May 10 marks the expiration date of "mandatory conciliation" wage talks decreed by Argentina's Labor Ministry between bus companies and the UTA urban and interurban bus drivers union. If an agreement is not reached, the union has said that it is likely to call a 72-hour strike for bus service in the country's interior provinces.

The talks, ordered on April 26, have made no progress. If the strike is carried out, it would affect travel to and from such cities as Córdoba, Rosario, Tucumán, Neuquén and Salta.

UTA has demanded parity for bus drivers in the interior with the wages of drivers in the Federal Capital and the Greater Buenos Aires region, known as the AMBA. In April, an agreement was signed for short and medium-distance AMBA drivers giving them a staggered 50 percent raise, raising their basic monthly pay to 150,000 pesos (US$1,289) in August.

A group of recycling workers held a protest at a Buenos Aires park May 5 to press demands for improved pay and working conditions. The protesters, members of the recycling cooperative Dawn of Cartóneros (from cartón, Spanish for cardboard), congregated at Parque Lezama, across from the Ministry of the Environment and Public Space, where they denounced "arbitrary salary discounts" imposed at "Green Centers" where they take their recyclables.

City police showed up to clear the road separating the Ministry and the park. In the fracas that ensued, 13 protesters were arrested and eight police officers were injured. The protesters then went to the Buenos Aires prosecutor's office, where they demanded the release of their colleagues and dialogue with officials. They were refused, and police arrested six more protesters.

According to a representative of the Excluded Workers Movement, with which the cooperative is affiliated, "They closed the door on them. And in the discussion to enter, a repression was unleashed that, from what I saw on videos, has no justification." The Buenos Aires government was also denounced by the Argentine Federation of Cartóneros, Carreros and Recyclers, which claimed that it "responds with an enormous and excessive police deployment."

Workers at the FireKing production plant in New Albany, Indiana, are slated to strike May 9 over wages and the health care plan. The 89 workers who manufacture storage products, such as safes and filing cabinets, voted down the company's "best and final offer."

FireKing claimed its first-year wage offer was the highest in company history. But Teamsters Local 89 indicated that workers are dissatisfied with the five-year wage plan with annual hourly increases of $1.47, $1.32, $1.23, $1.15 and $1.14. Workers want higher wage hikes and protection from inflation.

On health care, Teamsters business agent Jay Dennis described the company's United Healthcare plan to the *Tribune-Star* as "abysmal."

"It's got extremely high deductibles, anywhere from $3,000 to $3,500 for the individual and anywhere from $6,000 to $7,000 for the family. As far as the max out-of-pocket costs, you're looking at $4,500 to $6,800 for individuals, and you're looking at $9,000 to $13,000 for families per year for the health plan."

But the Teamsters bureaucracy is seeking to move FireKing workers over to a union-sponsored plan that FireKing says is "unworkable." In a statement, FireKing said the Teamsters health care plan "puts significant uncertainty on the company," declaring, "We … implore the union leadership to encourage the acceptance of the company's proposal."

Heavy equipment operators went on strike May 4 against GFL, which owns the Seven Mile Creek landfill near Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Members of the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 139 voted unanimously to strike after a year of negotiations failed to produce a new contract.

Workers are seeking higher wages and improved health care and pension benefits. GFL has resorted to management personnel in an attempt to continue operations.

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United States

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