

Argentine health workers stage strike; US contract firm charged with illegal use of child labor at meatpacking plants

Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 November 2022

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

Latin America

Health workers in Buenos Aires, Argentina held a strike and protests November 9. They were the latest in a series of actions by the Assembly of Health, Residents and Attendants to demand a raise and insurance coverage for attendants. They are also demanding the “immediate incorporation” of new health professionals for Buenos Aires hospitals.

A group of health workers sat in front of the headquarters of the Ministry of Health of the City, while another group of residents and attendants went to the Federation of Health Professionals to meet with a leader of the city’s Association of Psychologists.

The protesters voiced their suspicion that the city administration and the Association of Municipal Doctors (AMM) were holding meetings behind the backs of the residents and attendees, and they resolved to hold another protest on November 10. The AMM, according to the residents, refused to include residents in the meeting because they are not union members.

Meanwhile, strikes and protests have broken out elsewhere. In Río Cuarto, about 600 km (380 mi.) west of Buenos Aires, anger over low pay has sparked protests and strikes. At San Antonio de Padua Hospital, at least 13 on-call doctors have resigned over abysmal wages. Distrust of the unions is widespread, with protesters holding signs saying, for example, “Decent salaries! The unions don’t represent us.”

In Córdoba, capital of the province of the same name, hospital doctors are demanding a 120 percent raise in the basic salary and a December bonus of 100,000 pesos (US\$624). The city headed off a 72-hour strike, and the minister of health called for negotiations with five delegates for November 14.

The Subway and Premetro Workers Union Association (AGTSyP) staged limited “force measures” on November 11

and 14 in response to the lack of agreement with the Buenos Aires city government on three issues: shortening of the workweek from 36 to 30 hours; added personnel; and the prompt replacement of trains that contain asbestos.

The AGTSyP’s “force measures” consisted of opening the turnstiles at one station and one subway line from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m. and interrupting service from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m.

Argentina’s Union of Employees of the National Justice (UEJN) went on strike on November 10 and 11 to press judicial workers’ demands. These include the immediate payment of the fourth tranche of a raise that had been agreed to with the Supreme Court of Justice and demands for an increase in the budget for the courts.

According to UEJN President Julio Piumato, there are 200 unfilled positions in the court system. He said, “The Supreme Court must form a board of directors for social work made up of representatives of the high court, the union and the Association of Magistrates. The union knows what this institution needs, and it is the guarantee of health and prevention.”

The Union of Latam Pilots (SPL), which had received a 99 percent strike authorization vote from its members on November 5, announced that it had reached an agreement with the airline. Following the vote, the union and company representatives went into Labor Directorate-mandated mediation.

As the pandemic spread in 2020, Latam sacked 240 pilots and slashed wages by 30 percent. According to an emol.com report, “With the reactivation of activity, all levels of the company—including its senior executives—recovered 100% of their readjusted income, except for the pilots, who until now had maintained their reduced salaries.”

The report noted that “according to all projections, the next few years will be frankly a bonanza.” Latam’s EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization) forecasts for 2023 are US\$2 billion and US\$10 billion for 2026. The pilots voted overwhelmingly for the strike in order to recover the lost ground that they had suffered, especially considering the return to profitability.

SPL President Mario Trioncoso praised the deal, saying, “The

commission representing the company realized the fair nature of our demands ... and decided to opt for a sensible, modern agreement that is good for the company, for the workers and for our country.” Tellingly, according to Reuters, a union statement “provided no details of the accord.”

United States

The US Department of Labor charged Packer Sanitation Services of employing youths between the ages of 13 to 17 to clean meatpacking plants in violation of federal laws. The company is charged with illegally employing 31 youth to clean the kill floors where they cleaned electric knives, paddle bone pullers, fat skinner and meat bandsaws and the conveyor belts upon which the meat is cut.

A number of youth, including a 13-year-old, suffered chemical burns and other injuries. The youth all spoke Spanish and worked at plants owned by JBS Foods in Grand Island, Nebraska and two Minnesota plants located in Worthington and Marshall. JBS is the world’s largest meat processor.

The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 bars children under the age of 14 from working and those between 14 and 15 years of age from laboring after 9:00 p.m. from June 1 through Labor Day and past 7:00 p.m. during the school year.

Packer Sanitation Services claimed “strict compliance” with labor law and alluded to the possibility that “rogue individuals” were involved in the case. At the same time, it interfered with the Labor Department’s investigation into a number of instances.

Some 100 nurses and supporters held a rally November 12 at the Ascension Borges Hospital in Kalamazoo, Michigan, to demand better wages and safe staffing. The Michigan Nurses Association (MNA) has been conducting negotiations with Ascension for the past two months, and the old agreement expired on November 11.

Ascension revealed it is offering a 19 percent raise in the first year of a three-year contract proposal but did not disclose raises for the subsequent two years. Nurses counter that they want cost-of-living escalators in years two and three to protect them from inflation.

But on other issues that reflect a divide over safe staffing, Ascension is demanding a new clause that will force nurses to work every other weekend. As well, the company is seeking to wipe out the right to family or medical leave for part-time nurses and subject all leave guarantees to management’s whim. Management also wants to cut retirement benefits, something the MNA says could cost nurses \$30,000 or more.

Ascension operates 142 hospitals, ranking it the largest health care system in the United States. It is sitting on \$15.5 billion in cash and operates a venture capital fund.

More than 600 grocery workers at 31 Foodland supermarkets across Hawaii are preparing for a strike vote after bargaining failed to result in an agreement one-and-a-half years after the expiration of the old contract back on April 2021. Neither United Food and Commercial Workers Local 480 nor Foodland management have divulged the status of negotiations, except that they concern economic issues.

Foodland is solely based in Hawaii. Its stalling over coming to an agreement appears to be influenced not only by rising costs and supply chain issues but concern over the plans of Costco and Amazon to establish new distribution facilities on Oahu.

Canada

Over 100 nurses and other nursing home workers rallied outside a Calgary public residential care provider last week to highlight the abysmal contract offer proposed by Carewest, the largest institutional care provider in the city. Members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) and the United Nurses of Alberta have been without contracts since 2020.

Six of the 14 facilities operated by Carewest in Calgary are unionized, with one facility pending union certification. The previous contract saw the union and the employer negotiate wage freezes for 2017 and 2018. In 2019, an arbitrator followed up with a mandated 2019 freeze on workers’ wages.

In the current contract negotiations, Carewest management has proposed the continuation of a (back-dated) wage freeze for 2020 and 2021 with a 1 percent increase this year and a 1.25 percent raise in 2023. In the final year of this proposed contract, the wage freeze would once again kick in. Contract language will also remove some workers from collecting overtime pay for some duties even though management seeks contract language that would make some overtime mandatory.



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