

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Protests mount across multiple sectors in Colombia

Colombia's ostensibly left government was hit by protests and threats of mobilizations by several sectors last week.

On January 16, taxi drivers held sit-in protests in front of the Ministry of Mobility and the Bogotá Ombudsman to protest unfair treatment that they allege is meted out by traffic agents in the city, who have ticketed and "taken to the patio" (towed) taxis that they claim are not in conformance with city registration requirements. The cabbies' union called another sit-in for January 23 and is poised to join a national general strike on February 22 if the administration of President Gustavo Petro does not respond satisfactorily to their demands.

On January 18, bus riders gathered at stations of Bogotá's TransMilenio mass transit bus system to protest the hike in bus fares by 1,000 pesos (US\$0.22). A statement from protest organizers declared, "The people of the city are tired of the fact that year after year the big businessmen steal the money from the people of Bogotá. It is necessary to take to the streets and demand that the District Government, headed by [Green Alliance party mayor and Petro ally] Claudia López, lower fares and improve transport conditions."

On January 20, over 1,500 farmers of Santander and Norte de Santander struck and blocked roads for 30 hours, demanding that Law 1930 of 2018, which dictates provisions for the management of the highlands, known as páramos, be modified. According to the law, highland farmers (parameros) cannot grow certain root crops, which constitute their main income source, above 2,800 meters (9,200 ft.) above sea level. A spokesperson for the parameros also denounced the hardships resulting from "contamination generated by multinationals, megamining and the misuse of natural resources."

Protest actions by students, who played an important role in Petro's 2020 electoral victory, are likely in the offing as well. Students have expressed their disappointment with his broken promises, including those regarding rising inflation, the minimum wage, student loan interest rates, education budgets and free education. A leader of the Colombian Association of Student Representatives recently stated, "It is not a government of change. Mobilization is the way."

Hospital workers in Argentina vote for three-day strike after no response to two-day walkout over pay, conditions

A January 19 assembly of workers at the Posadas Hospital in El Palomar, a town northwest of the city of Buenos Aires, voted for a 72-hour strike beginning January 24. The vote, held by the Union Federation of Health Professionals (Fesprosa), followed a two-day walkout on January 17 and 18 to protest the lack of fulfillment of promises made by hospital directors in December at a mandatory conciliation meeting called by the Ministry of Labor.

One of the main issues is job security. A Fesprosa statement asserted that "90 percent of the workers suffer precarious conditions, and the national state did not politically resolve the issue of decent employment for 5,000 people who gave everything to face the pandemic and support more than 1,000 sick people and 5 deaths." There are workers with 30 years of seniority who have not been given permanent status, according to union officials.

Other points of contention are wage parity, a bonus of 100,000 peso (US\$545) as opposed to the 30,000 peso (US\$163) that was granted, job re-classifications, special licenses and improved working conditions.

Argentine television workers hold 24-hour strike for salary raise

Members of the Argentine Television Union (SATSAID) walked off the job on January 18 to demand better pay. The union demanded a salary hike of 24 percent for the January, February and March quarter, a demand that was rejected by the ATA and CAPIT media business chambers.

SATSAID and the chambers agreed to establish three-month wage increase tranches, the first being for October, November and December. However, the second tranche was, in the words of SATSAID head Pablo Storino, "shameful," and he requested "a proposal with a minimum of dignity" for the next meeting.

Panamanian pilots set to strike as negotiations remain deadlocked

The union representing pilots in the Compañía Panameña de Aviación (COPA) announced January 20 that its members will go on strike February 2 if its demands are not met. The Panamanian Union of Commercial Aviators (UNPAC) and COPA have been engaged in negotiations since October 2022 without reaching an agreement.

Principal among the union's proposals is improvement in salaries. A member of the negotiating committee told reporters that "during the pandemic, all the company pilots made a sacrifice, not only when we were suspended, but we also offered to support the company and we

were on reduced hours. Today we have more than a year and a half without an increase, waiting for the company to recover so we can sit down and talk.” As has happened in other industries, management is treating supposedly temporary sacrifices as permanent. While COPA has rebounded and issued statements attesting to its financial strength, inflation has already cut purchasing power for the working class by nearly 10 percent, with no end in sight.

Other demands by UNPAC include improvements in salary terms for pregnant pilots, increases in the company’s contribution to health insurance, improved retirement plans, and efficiency and productivity incentives. The union also requests “improvements in the quality of life of the pilots, improving their rest areas, lodging and food on board the aircraft.”

The strike authorization was already approved in a general assembly. Although COPA has stonewalled for months, UNPAC officials say that they are still willing to continue negotiating, and that the Ministry of Labor “sets the parameters” for the legality of industrial action.

Tennessee machinists strike over benefits and shift changes

Machinists at the Mueller Company in Chattanooga, Tennessee struck January 16 after an overwhelming rejection of the company’s contract proposal. The 102 workers, represented by Local 56 of the International Association of Machinists, opposed a company proposal that will implement a 4-day, 10-hour shift, followed by a second crew working a 3-day, 12-hour shift that would rob workers of overtime.

Workers also rejected a 7.25 percent pay increase that will be wiped out by an eight percent increase in the cost of insurance premiums.

The striking machinists represent a small portion of the 592 workers at the plant. The balance of workers are represented by the United Steel Workers (USW). The USW settled its contract last year, but members are calling for a vote to honor the picket lines of machinists.

Portland nurses rally to demand safe staffing levels, wages and benefits

Nurses rallied outside the headquarters of Providence hospitals’ headquarters in Portland, Oregon, January 20 to demand increased pay, benefits and improved staffing levels. Some 2,000 members of the Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) at three facilities—Providence Portland Medical Center, Providence Home Health and Hospice and Providence Seaside—have been without a contract since the old agreement expired late last year.

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Nurse Jamie Canales told the Lund Report that nurses were resigning over “unmanageable” caseloads, and want “enforceable” contract language governing staffing levels.

The Providence Health & Services, a Catholic non-profit based out of Renton, Washington, operates 51 hospitals across seven states and more than 800 non-acute facilities and other operations. The ONA settled separate contracts with Providence St. Vincent Medical Center,

west of Portland, and Providence Willamette Falls, south of Portland.

One-day strike at St Louis, Missouri health care facility

Health care workers at Hillside Manor Healthcare and Rehab in St Louis, Missouri, held a one-day strike January 16 to protest low wages and atrocious working conditions. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has been seeking an initial contract for the workers.

Workers complain that the facility is infested with bedbugs, mice and cockroaches. The only wage increase workers have received was when the state of Missouri raised the minimum wage to \$12 an hour, forcing management to increase the \$11.25 many workers were getting.

Lenny Jones of the SEIU told the *St Louis Post Dispatch*, “We don’t have steady workers here. It’s a revolving door, we keep getting different workers, we have agency workers that come here. They get paid way more than us.”

Hillside Manor was acquired one year ago by Luxor Healthcare Group, a New York-based investor firm. A short time later four long-term workers and union reps were fired.

Private sector ambulance drivers and paramedics begin all-out strike in Newfoundland

About 120 private sector paramedics and ambulance drivers, members of the Teamsters Union, began a strike this past Friday involving crews in central and eastern Newfoundland that service Clarenville, Ferryland, Come-by-Chance and nearby rural areas. The workers are employed by private businessman Robert Fewer. They have been without a contract since March 2020.

The strike came after the employer victimized a worker participating in a week-long work-to-rule. The company has already mobilized non-union workers to staff the ambulances and public health units and will also try to cover emergency services, but both have warned that coverage may not be timely. Even without the strike, the austerity policies of successive governments in the province have led to a steady deterioration of all aspects of health care for Newfoundland residents.

The Conservative provincial government, which has stood by for months as the employer refused to negotiate with the union, held an emergency debate in the Legislative Assembly on Monday in order to enact the Essential Ambulance Services Act, which would make private ambulance services essential. The Act will force the strikers to return to work until an essential services agreement is reached providing for adequate ambulance coverage.



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