Uruguay unions stage one day strike against “pension reforms;” striking Maui Health workers reject management latest offer

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Latin America

Uruguay’s PIT-CNT federation as well as other unions and social organizations called a one-day strike for March 23 to protest pension “reforms” promoted by President Luis Lacalle Pou and under discussion in a parliamentary committee. The main change would be the raising of the retirement age from 60 to 65.

Several unions, such as the Trade Union Association of Transport Cooperatives and Workers and the Bankers Association of Uruguay complied with the PIT-CNT call for a 24-hour stoppage. Others, like the National Union of Transport Workers and Laborers, did not strike, but joined in the demonstrations. Private health care workers struck from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 a.m., while public health care workers struck all day, keeping emergency services in operation.

The protesting workers marched from the University of the Republic in Montevideo to the Legislative Palace, where various union bureaucrats and representatives of social organizations excoriated the “reforms” as antidemocratic and harmful to workers and society’s most vulnerable citizens.

PIT-CNT Executive Secretariat member Enrique Méndez described the reform as a “brutal synthesis of the adjustment process” that lacked popular support. He announced that the protests would continue if the changes were approved.

A group of retired public service workers, holding picket signs and chanting, protested outside Belize’s National Assembly building in the capital Belmopan on March 22. The protest, held during the 2023-24 National Budget debate, was carried out to demand monies that have been owed to the retirees for over a quarter century.

From 1995 to 1997, the administration of then Prime Minister Manuel Esquivel, with the agreement of the public service workers’ unions, froze their wage increments, claiming the need to use the money to finance projects. The workers were given shares in Belize Telecommunications Limited (now Belize Telemedia Limited), or BTL, which placed monies in the Public Sector Workers’ Trust.

With inflation rising, the retirees are demanding their money back. The government instead has handed out bags of groceries every month, but the retirees want the Trust to be dissolved and the cash—now reportedly around nine million dollars—to be distributed to them.

Prime Minister John Briceño and Minister of Public Service Henry Usher left the Assembly to offer blandishments to the crowd. Briceño professed full agreement with the retirees, but asserted that the matter had to await a decision in the Court of Appeal. According to an amandala.com report, “The Prime Minister also assured the demonstrators that after the Easter vacation, he, along with the Association [of Beneficiaries and Retired Public Officers], would sit and further discuss ways to resolve this issue.”

Residents of the Los Cocos community, in the northern Dominican Republic’s municipal district of San Francisco de Jacagua, held protests, including the obstruction of traffic and burning tires on March 23 over the lack of drinking water. The residents had held vigils for a month to no avail.

The Santiago Aqueduct and Sewerage Corporation (Coraasan), which is contracted to provide the water, has claimed that there are problems in the drive pump. Residents have had to walk long distances to acquire water from barrels. Since 2022, there have been three occasions when the two tube wells providing the water have broken down. The area has been hit by drought recently, exacerbating the situation.

Members of the West Indies Group of University Teachers (WIGUT) picketed the University of the West Indies’ (UWI) St Augustine campus on March 23, resuming protests

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that they have held for two months over the slow pace of negotiations for a salary increase. As some of the picket signs indicated, the teachers have not had a salary increase since 2014.

The professors want a raise of at least 10 percent, while UWI administration has floated 4 percent. Among the protest actions taken by the professors are “refusing to sign and submit final exam papers to the examination section; refusing to upload students' coursework grades and only indicating whether they failed or passed; refusing to hold office hours and respond to students and facilitators outside the classroom; and refusing to hold remedial classes, among other things,” according to Trinidad and Tobago Newsday.

At the protest, WIGUT vice president Russel Ramsewak told reporters that the union submitted a proposal in 2019 to the UWI principal, but that it was not submitted to the Chief Personnel Officer (CPO) until May of 2022. He added, “To date, no further action is forthcoming,” except for an “update” by the principal that the CPO will take the file to an interministerial team within four to six weeks.

Ramsewak questioned the lack of a fixed timeline and added, “So at this point, we are very, very annoyed.”

United States

Some 35 staff members at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont, went on strike March 24 after their union reached an impasse in bargaining. Members of United Auto Workers Local 2322 comprise workers in IT, housekeeping, food service, the library and finance office, but not faculty, who continue to hold classes.

Negotiations between the administration and the union have dragged on for a year. Given that, workers asked the college to implement a 3 percent cost-of-living hike while bargaining continued. But management would only agree to the measure if workers gave up concessions on work rules and other economic issues.

Besides voting to strike, workers also passed a resolution declaring no confidence in Goddard College President Dan Hocoy. who responded, calling the strike “irresponsible.”

Goddard has been plagued by economic problems. It has been on probation with the New England Commission of Higher Education in relation to finances and governance.

Striker Alisha Raby, who runs four departments, told the website Seven Days, “I don’t even make $20 an hour… I’m an alum, and I love this place dearly. I want to move up and shine and be amazing, but I can’t pay my bills.”

The 500 workers at Maui Memorial Medical Center, Kula Hospital, and Lanai Community hospital in Maui, Hawaii, voted March 21 to reject the fourth contract offer by management as their strike enters its second month. The administration had declared the proposal a “last, best and final offer.”

Maui Health had proposed a first-year wage increase of 8.9 percent, along with a $1,500 cash bonus for all workers, additional bonuses of $1,000 for workers with 15 or more years of seniority and $500 for workers with 7 to 14 years.

According to the United Public Workers (UPW) which represents the strikers, the contract rejection involved the greatest number of bargaining committee members and the result was an overwhelming no vote.

Staff workers at Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island, carried out a one-day unfair labor practices strike March 26 to demand wage increases. Teamsters Local 251, which represents the 62 custodial and groundskeepers, has been in negotiations for a first-time contract for nine months and talks have broken down.

The unfair labor practices charge filed by Local 251 alleges the college administration unilaterally changed starting rates for workers. The college issued its final offer to workers on February 16.

Canada

Members of Public Service Alliance of Canada are continuing a vote on strike authorization which concludes April 11. If approved, the union could call a legal strike within 60 days. The 155,000 workers have been without a contract since October 31, 2021 amid soaring inflation.

PSAC National President Chris Aylward downplayed the likelihood of a strike, saying the goal of the union was to come to an agreement. Any walkout could be a huge embarrassment for the Trudeau government.

The bargaining unit includes 35,000 taxation employees. The deadline for filing federal taxes in Canada is May 1. While a majority of the federal workers have been deemed eligible to strike, including taxation employees, that does not preclude the passage of legislation imposing a settlement.

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