

Bolivian teachers continue strikes and protests; Witchita, Kansas aerospace workers vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

Bolivian teachers continue strikes, protests against working conditions, repression

Teachers in Bolivia have continued with protests and strikes over unpaid wages, supply shortages, an inadequate education budget, police repression and other issues. On March 30, teachers in cities across the nation began a two-day strike that included street blockades and marches.

In La Paz, over 20,000 teachers congregated and marched to the Ministry of Education, to be confronted by police, who attacked them with pepper spray. In Santa Cruz, protesting teachers forced the closure of the Departmental Education Service.

In cities such as Sucre, Potosí, Trinidad, Cochabamba and others, roadblocks snarled traffic and bus travel.

Education Minister Edgar Pary attempted to discredit the protesters by claiming that they were involved with forces that brought Jeanine Áñez to power in the US-backed coup in 2019. He also claimed that some parents and teachers were being forced to march.

Colombian teachers hold two-day strike over budget, privatization, jobs

Teachers in Bogotá, Colombia struck and mobilized protest actions on March 28 and 29. The educators oppose irregularities in spending of the city budget, programs that they see as covert moves to privatization and overexploitation of teachers. They are calling for more job opportunities, better working conditions and other demands.

A District Association of Education Workers (ADE) denounced the local government for promoting “a labor persecution of union leaders, teachers, teaching directors who present their

nonconformity due to decisions without consultation with the school government in the IED.”

On March 28, the teachers marched to the Bogotá Mayor’s Office with their demands. The next day, they marched to the office of the Secretary of Education.

Panamanian firefighters’ strike over pay and promotions cut short by signing of agreement

Firefighters in Panama began a strike March 30 over the government’s noncompliance with an agreement signed last June. The agreement had involved salary adjustments and promotions, but authorities dragged their feet. The payment owed for the promotions is estimated at around US\$2.9 million.

Government authorities and firefighters union reps held a lengthy high-level meeting on March 31, in which not only the pay and promotions were discussed, but the budget and acquisition of equipment as well. They signed an agreement late that night that will set up a “joint participation technical table” on April 13 “with the objective of establishing the methodology, classifying the cases, in order to modify the position structure of the institution,” according to a Destino Panamá report.

In the document, the parties—including the Economy and Finance Ministries, the government and bureaucrats of two firefighters unions—agree to work “in harmonious collaboration to comply with the agreement.”

Jamaican Industrial Disputes Tribunal blocks strike by aluminum workers

Jamaica’s Industrial Disputes Tribunal (IDT) issued a no-strike order March 31 to workers at UC Rusal Alumina Jamaica Limited, a Russia-based aluminum production company. The over 600 workers had resolved to walk off the job on April 3 due to a breakdown in talks between the Union of Clerical Administrative and Supervisory Employees (UCASE) and the company.

The main sticking points are wages and fringe benefits, over which UC Rusal has stonewalled. Meetings called by the Labour Ministry have been, in the words of UCASE head Vincent Morrison, “an exercise in futility,” with the company’s attitude being “take it or leave it.”

Following the failure of the meetings, the Labour Ministry referred the dispute to the IDT, which issued a statement on the night of April 1 ordering the workers to maintain normal operations while it holds hearings over the dispute.

United States

Kansas aerospace workers vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike

Workers at Spirit AeroSystems in Wichita, Kansas voted by a 99.9 percent margin to authorize strike action in the upcoming negotiations between the company and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local Lodge 839. The 5,500 members of the IAM constitute the largest section of unionized workers among the 11,000 employees at the plant which manufactures components for the aerospace corporation Boeing.

Machinists have labored under the same contract for 13 years. In January 2020, amid the pandemic, the 10-year contract ran out and the IAM extended that agreement for 3 years. Bargaining will begin on May 1 and the old agreement expires in June of this year.

Back when the original proposal was being negotiated in 2010, a majority of workers voted the contract down. But the IAM accepted the agreement claiming that the contract rejection had not achieved a super-majority.

The IAM has declined to make public their current bargaining position. Corporate management responded to the strike authorization, saying, “Spirit understands that the strike sanction vote is part of the IAM’s internal process. This vote does not mean a strike will occur.”

New York freelance orchestra musicians rally after one month on strike

Striking New York freelance orchestra musicians held an impromptu concert outside David Geffen Hall March 26, to call attention to their demands for job security, improved wages and health benefits. Members of the American Federation of Musicians Local 802 struck more than a month ago after mediated contract talks broke down over hiring practices by Distinguished Concerts International (DCINY).

That deadlock in bargaining had to do with DCINY’s refusal to consider a hiring list, a standard among professional orchestras. Greg Williams, who plays viola, declared, “It is not unreasonable for musicians to know how often they can expect to be hired to perform in a given year, according to an ordered hiring list,

without a sizable portion of the orchestra being replaced by new players...”

Strikers also want contract language providing breaks and a pension. Musicians first organized back in 2019 and have yet to obtain a contract with DCINY. They mainly perform at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall.

Museum workers protest lack of contract at Art Institute of Chicago

Staff workers at the Art Institute of Chicago mounted a protest in front of the Museum March 30 over the lack of progress in contract talks. Over 600 workers first unionized towards the end of 2021 to demand what they call an “equitable, sustainable and transparent workplace,” but are still without a contract.

Problems came to a boil with the pandemic and the decision by the museum to lay off workers. Employees received no voice in the matter and decided to organize as the Art Institute of Chicago Workers United (AICWU).

Canada

Windsor, Ontario salt workers’ strike in seventh week

Two hundred and fifty workers at the Windsor Salt mine in Windsor, Ontario are in their seventh week of strike action.

The strikers, who include miners, processing and office workers, are opposing management’s plans to slash jobs through the wholesale contracting out of work.

So determined is the company to shred the existing limited job security protections, it has tried to make workers’ acceptance of its sweeping concessions demands on this issue a precondition for talks on the rest of the contract.

In 2021, the hundred-year-old facility was bought by Stone Canyon Industries, a US-based holding company that has been buying up salt mines and companies across North America with the aim of using its market power to drive up consumer prices and slash labour costs.

There is strong support for the Windsor Salt strikers among the thousands of Unifor members employed in Windsor’s auto and auto-parts plants, but the union is doing nothing to mobilize them. Instead, it is urging workers to appeal to the federal Liberal and Ontario Conservative governments to pressure the company to moderate its concession demands.

On Monday, management representatives and negotiators for Unifor Locals 240 and 1959 began what are supposed to be four days of contract talks this week.



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