

Workers occupy Mexico steel plant; El Centro, California transit workers walk out

Workers Struggles: The Americas

1 May 2023

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

Teachers conduct protest strike in Buenos Aires province in defiance of union bureaucracy

On Tuesday and Wednesday, April 25 and 26, teachers in Buenos Aires, Argentina's most populous province, carried out a protest strike over wages and working conditions. The strike took place in the context of Argentina's debt crisis, accelerating inflation, and runs on banks. The teachers union bureaucracy attempted to sabotage the action by posting messages on social media demanding that teachers ignore the strike. The union appeal was mostly ignored.

In the Port City of Bahia Blanca, hundreds of striking teachers marched in protest and rallied in the city center. Teachers' wages have failed to keep up with yearly inflation rates of 100 percent. Over 50 percent of Argentine households are forced to exist below the poverty line. Many students depend on school provided meals, whose budget is also under attack.

Workers occupy Altos Hornos de México steel plant

On April 25, 800 workers marched into the Altos Hornos de México steel plant in the border city of Monclova, Coahuila State, Mexico, and took it over. At issue is unpaid wages and bonuses owed to them since December 2022. Workers involved in the takeover declared that they have had enough with the conditions at the plant. Altos Hornos de México officially declared bankruptcy on April 17, 2023.

Sixteen hundred blue and white collar workers are owed wages. Another 6,500 have been laid-off.

The company, part of Mexico's state-owned steel industry, was privatized in 1991 in what is widely acknowledged was a fire-sale, a deep discount estimated at 1/3 its market value. This was part of

the re-privatization carried out under President Carlos Salinas in the 1980s and 90s.

An immediate cause of the plant takeover was that workers were largely kept in the dark by the company, government authorities, and their own trade union, about the events that resulted in the bankruptcy of the firm.

Workers protest in Caracas, Venezuela over collapsing living standards

On Thursday, April 27, hundreds of workers marched in Caracas and rallied at the Treasury to protest Maduro administration policies and the social crisis. At the rally workers denounced government corruption and called for wage increases above the poverty line, in the context of rising inflation. Protesters carried signs calling for more funds for education and health services. Other signs called for an end to layoffs in coffee and other industries that are taking place in Venezuela.

United States

California transit workers strike after months of fruitless negotiations

Transit workers for the Imperial County Transportation Commission in El Centro, California, went on strike April 25 over wages, working conditions and the duration of the contract. Members of Teamsters Local 542, who have been involved in months of negotiations with the giant third-party transit operator First Transit, declared "our members have not received an offer from their employer that provides adequate safety, work protections, and livable wages."

The exact nature of the issues in dispute have not been made public, but the union gave an indication that its current stance is open to change, declaring it is "willing to have an open dialog with the employer in order to resolve our differences."

Management has assigned supervisors to operate buses during

the strike and offered free fares to riders in an effort to break the strike. First Transit has 19,000 employees and operates in 39 states as well as Puerto Rico, Panama, India and four Canadian provinces.

Financial service workers in Wisconsin authorize strike

Some 450 workers for the financial services company CUNA Mutual Group in Madison, Wisconsin, voted by a 92 percent margin April 24 to authorize strike action after the union filed a number of unfair labor practices violations. Members of the Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 39, not having had a raise since 2021, are seeking wage increases to combat inflation, along with increase health care coverage and an end to the outsourcing of jobs.

CUNA Mutual Group, which is currently re-branding itself as TruStage while amassing \$5.2 billion in revenue during 2022, has outsourced 1,200 union jobs since 2000. In the present contract negotiations, the company wants to eliminate the current defined-benefit pension plan for new hires, a measure workers fear will lead to a future division in the workforce.

During the pandemic, 90 percent of the workforce was able to work from home. Workers want to continue the practice indicating it provided a better work/life balance. Among the unfair labor practice charges, workers are accusing the company of retaliation and intimidation, including the firing of chief steward Joe Evica on April 4. Union attorney Lester Pines charged the firing was based on “trumped-up charges.”

The strike authorization will expire after a month.
Canada

British Columbia transit workers continue month-long strike

Public transit workers in British Columbia’s Fraser Valley region continue to strike for higher wages and an employer-funded pension system as their employer, First Transit, refuses to resume negotiations.

The 213 workers, represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 561, have been on strike since March 20. First Transit is contracted by British Columbia Transit to deliver public transit services in the region.

The transit workers include both transit operators and maintenance staff. They are asking for a 32 percent wage increase, less grueling work schedules, and a pension fund subsidized by the employer. The workers earn about one-third less than their counterparts in the lower mainland region around Vancouver.

CUPE, the largest public sector union in the country with hundreds of thousands of members, has refused to mobilize its broader membership in the province and across Canada in support of the transit workers. They have instead made appeals to the

provincial government to directly intervene in the strike, which would only mean the tabling of strikebreaking legislation.

Approximately 740 transit workers in the Kitchener-Waterloo region launched a strike on Monday, May 1, after rejecting a tentative agreement negotiated between their union, UNIFOR Local 4304, and their employer, Grand River Transit (GRT). The workers include 650 transit operators and around 90 maintenance and support staff.

UNIFOR has not released details of the tentative agreement, only saying that the main issues are “scheduling, work-life balance and wages.” Brendan Burke, UNIFOR Local 4304 President, told CBC News that some issues operators face are being forced to skip bathroom breaks under grueling schedules, and not being paid until making their first stop of the day. GRT predictably claimed that it offered a deal that was “competitive for GRT staff and affordable for residents.”

Local 4304 members last negotiated a collective agreement in January 2020. In that struggle, the UNIFOR bureaucracy prevented a strike by agreeing to a below-inflation 6 percent wage increase over three years, as well as a flat \$3.00 per hour increase for mechanics and a \$2.25 per hour increase for part-time employees.

Then-UNIFOR President Jerry Dias, now implicated in a kickbacks scandal, claimed at the time that the 2020 sellout deal “addresses the top concerns of members.”

Western Quebec school bus drivers take strike action

About 300 school bus drivers in the Outaouais region of Quebec, near the national capital, have gone on strike over higher wages and better working conditions. The strike affects dozens of schools in the region.

The workers, represented by Teamsters Canada Local 106, say that the employers, including Autobus Campeau, Autobus Lasalle, and Bigras Transport, refuse to come to the bargaining table. The two sides last met for negotiations in early April.

Most of the school bus drivers work under 20 hours per week for poverty wages and are forced to work onerous split shifts, essentially putting them on-call for the whole workday without compensation.

The provincial and regional governments, as well as the corporate media, have already whipped up a right-wing hysteria over the strike, blaming the bus drivers for inconveniences caused by it, and mobilizing the police to patrol school zones because the lack of school buses would supposedly create dangerous conditions.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact