

## Chilean teachers launch 48-hour strike; Dominican Republic health workers protest private insurance system

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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### Chilean teachers conduct 48-hour strike over demands

Last Wednesday, Chilean teachers began a 48-hour strike against the government of President Gabriel Boric. At issue are eight demands that were presented to the Ministry of Education in Santiago. The government has yet to address those demands, which include the payment of unpaid retirement bonuses, better working conditions for teachers and payment of the “historic debt” left over from the savage slashing of teachers’ wages during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), estimated at US\$7 billion. The payment of this historic debt was one of Boric’s promises during the electoral campaign.

Hundreds of educators from across the country marched and rallied in the port city of Valparaíso, on the Pacific Ocean west of Santiago and rallied in front of the National Legislature.

The strikers gave the Boric administration until August 17 to give in to their demands. If not, they will organize a national strike of indefinite duration.

On Thursday, teachers estimated that over 90 percent of the teachers had participated in the job action.

### Hundreds march in Bogotá, Colombia to demand paramilitaries disband

On August 2, hundreds of protesters marched through central Bogotá, Colombia’s capital, from the headquarters of national oil company EcoPetrol to the offices of the Interior Ministry, demanding the break-up of government-sponsored paramilitary groups.

The protests denounced the lack of policies to guarantee social safety and security, directly as a consequence of the virtual military occupation of vast territories by the paramilitary, which has become more intense since the pandemic. EcoPetrol is widely blamed for supporting the paramilitary squads and bribing politicians in order to illegally take over oil-bearing territories, expropriating them from their inhabitants.

The protests were organized by the Congress of the People, peasant groups, and human and social rights organizations, whose members have been repeatedly victimized by government paramilitary forces.

Protest marches and rallies also occurred in the cities of Cali, Bucaramanga, Medellín, Tadó, and Casanare.

### Dominican Republic health workers protest private insurance system

On Monday, July 31, medical doctors in public and private hospitals and clinics carried out a 12-hour strike demanding a solution to the insurance crisis across this impoverished nation following the collapse of negotiations with the government of President Luis Abinader.

The health professionals are demanding the expansion of government health programs and an end to the “profits before health” policies of the private insurance system (ARS), which doctors accuse of running a health mafia that routinely overrides medical decisions to boost profits.

Senén Caba, president of the Dominican Medical Union, reported a 98 percent participation rate.

This strike will be followed by a 48-hour strike this Thursday and Friday, which will include dentists, psychologists, nurses and lab workers.

### Teachers strike in Tucumán Province, Argentina against poverty wages

Last Friday, teachers in Tucumán province in NW Argentina carried out a one-day protest strike against the hunger conditions imposed in the last contract, in February, by the trade unions that “represent” them. The contract imposed wages that leave the majority of classroom teachers below the poverty line. The strike was organized independently from the unions by three groups: Independent Educators, the Self-organized, and the Brown Group (linked to the pseudo-left FIT electoral front).

The strikers are demanding a US\$1,000 dollar minimum monthly wage indexed to inflation, shorter working hours, the hiring of more educators and a massive investment in schools and classrooms. The Tucumán strike is the latest in a wave of teachers’ strikes and protests across Argentina this year.

### Idaho workers vote to strike at four Amalgamated Sugar plants

About 1,200 workers at four Amalgamated Sugar Company beet-processing plants in Idaho voted over two days ending July 28. They rejected a company proposal by a decisive margin, according to Local 283 of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union.

The proposal, presented by the company on July 26, would freeze pensions for low-seniority workers, implement a two-tier wage system

and allow management to shift workers between departments at their whim. Further stoking workers' anger is the indifference shown by the company toward sanitary conditions, as workers are forced to use unmaintained portable toilets in 90-plus degree heat.

Brendan Van Sickel, the vice president of Local 283G at the Twin Falls, Idaho, facility, admitted workers were "not fond of this offer." However, the union is not going to call a strike.

"Hopefully we will be able to go back in, start doing the negotiations, and I'm pretty sure that at the rate it's going right now that the company will work with us," Van Sickel told the *Times-News*.

The two sides have been negotiating since the end of May. A new round of talks is scheduled to resume August 9.

### **Workers in Mendocino County, California, vote to strike over pay, benefits and falling staff rates**

Some 700 workers for Mendocino County, California, voted by 92.4 percent July 28 to authorize their union to call a strike. The County Board of Supervisors has insisted that members of the Service Employees International Union Local 1021 shoulder even more of the burden of their healthcare and retirement benefit costs, something the union says will result in a pay cut. The board has rejected out of hand a demand by workers for a cost-of-living-adjustment to counter inflation.

Local 1021 cites the fact that county revenues have increased by 44.8 percent since 2019-2020. The union has said that the county's proposal will "only exacerbate the current staffing crisis by pushing even more Mendocino County workers to opt for better-paid positions in neighboring counties, cities, and the private sector."

According to the union, the rate of vacant positions is 29 percent. Among Family & Children's Services the rate is 40 percent. For Department of Transportation road crews it is 44 percent. And the vacancy rate for mental health clinicians has reached an astronomical 70 percent.

An immediate strike is not being planned by the union, given the Board of Supervisors is in recess until August 29. The contract covers public health nurses, children's social workers, librarians, road crews and other employees.

### **Los Angeles nurses vote overwhelmingly to strike over under-staffing**

The California Nurses Association (CNA) announced July 31 that 98 percent of the 230 nurses at Cedars-Sinai Marina del Rey Hospital in the Los Angeles region have voted to strike. The CNA says the strike authorization was motivated because the "hospital has refused to address critical nurse recruitment and retention issues, which directly affect patient care."

Sophia Sabido, a registered nurse in the emergency room department, said in a CNA release, "We have lost many experienced nurses over the last year but Cedars-Sinai's administration is refusing to address the reasons for poor retention rates and their contribution to this problem. Instead, management resorts to staffing our hospital with temporary contract nurses, who often outnumber staff RN's."

"We need a strong contract to recruit and retain experienced nurses who will stay at our hospital," said Sabido. "But after months of bargaining, Cedars-Sinai Marina del Rey Hospital continues to propose contract takeaways."

The previous contract agreement expired in February of this year. A statement from management indicated that the CNA has yet to give the hospital a strike notice.

In December of last year 400 members of the Service Employees International Union at Cedars-Sinai held a five-day strike to demand increased pay and improved staffing levels.

### **St. Lawrence Seaway workers reject Unifor tentative deal**

Four hundred and fifty workers at the St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corporation (SLSMC) voted last week to reject a contract presented to them by Unifor Locals 1959 and 240. The workers, who support seaway infrastructure from Montreal to Niagara, maintain the locks, bridges and canals used to transport deep-water shipping into the Great Lakes. They are also tasked with ensuring the safe and effective movement and mooring of ships along the seaway.

Unifor had conducted negotiations through a conciliator after discussions stalled with SLSMC management. The union, reluctant to move towards a required 72-hour strike notice, has sought to renew negotiations with the conciliator.

The revolt by seaway workers comes on the heels of a bitter struggle by longshore workers organized by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union at the Pacific coast ports. Those workers successfully resisted one miserable tentative agreement from coming to a full vote and then voted down another proposed deal before finally ratifying a deal after pressure from their union leaders and threats of imminent legislation by the federal government to criminalize any further strike action by the dockworkers.

The rejection of the Seaway contract proposal is the third contract voted down by Unifor members over the past two weeks. In the Greater Toronto Area, 3,700 grocery workers went on strike after soundly rejecting a miserable offer that had been promoted by the union as the "best deal in decades." And in Windsor, Ontario, over 200 salt miners rejected a contract last week that had been presented to them by Unifor. Miners, clerical staff and fine salt workers have been on strike since February 17.

Some 18,000 auto workers organized by Unifor will take note of the gulf that continues to grow between union members and the union bureaucracy as Unifor begins its negotiations for new contracts with General Motors, Stellantis and Ford on August 10.



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