

Strike by California dialysis workers; Chilean health workers protest firings; Air Canada pilots picket Toronto Airport as contract expires

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

Chilean health workers protest firings

Last Thursday health workers took over several offices of the Health Ministry in Santiago demanding that the Boric administration cancel plans to lay off 6,300 health workers who had been hired during the pandemic but will be fired once the government declares the pandemic over.

Health workers insist that they will continue occupying the Health Ministry until it recognizes the critical importance of these workers. “Nobody is in excess here,” declared one of the strikers; “Ministry officials have refused to meet with us; they refuse to recognize the need for these workers.”

This Monday and Tuesday health workers plan to strike to denounce President Boric for his refusal to fulfill promises of increasing the health budget for Chile.

Boric recently presented his administration’s 2024 budget, which makes no provision to keep the health workers who are slated to be sacked.

Residents of Mexico’s Chiapas state protest criminal violence

Last Tuesday, 10,000 workers and peasants mobilized in the city of Siltepec, in the Mexican state of Chiapas, to protest the federal and state governments’ refusal to combat violent gangs that terrorize the region’s residents. Siltepec sits near the Mexico-Guatemala border.

Protesters interviewed by Telesur said that there is a constant presence of armed gang members in their communities, which carry out shootings, kidnappings and assassinations, as in the killing of four men on September 22 by gangsters.

Conditions have worsened in the last few weeks due to wars between gangs. This has led to road blockades that have immobilized local residents, prevented the movement of food, interrupted government and banking activities and prevented over 5,000 children from attending school.

Human rights groups report that two years of gang wars have created an exodus of peasants on both sides of the Mexico-Guatemala border, as more and more people are forced to abandon their land because of the violence.

More protests against Peru’s Boluarte regime

On Monday, September 25, protests by peasants and academic workers took place in the southern city of Arequipa against the operation of the Tia Maria Copper Mine project. The protest took place on the day of the opening of the Perumin 36 Mining Convention, attended by acting president Dina Boluarte, who at one time opposed the project but is now letting it proceed. The organizers of the protest, The Arequipa Struggle Committee, considers Boluarte a dictator who serves the interests of the mining monopolies.

The protesters have denounced the opening of two copper mines, Tia Maria and La Tapada, for their impact on the environment, including the loss of water rights and the environmental degradation of the region, “leaving only misery for the Andean towns and usurping the land of small farmers,” in the words of one of the protesters. Both mines are scheduled to begin operations in 2027.

Argentina protest demands rise in minimum wage

Last Wednesday, left nationalists Unidad Piquetera and Libres del Sur led a protest march of thousands of workers in downtown Buenos Aires and rallied at the headquarters of the Labor and Economics Ministry demanding a minimum wage of 300,000 pesos to keep workers from falling below the poverty line.

Thousands marched behind a banner that read “Without jobs and a decent salary, THERE IS NO FUTURE.” Argentina is in a debt crisis, with inflation at an annual rate of 124 percent. Forty percent of the population subsists under the poverty line.

While the march was going on, the Wage Council met and raised the minimum by 32 percent to 156,000 pesos, way below the workers’ demand. In response, both organizations called for a national general strike.

United States

Kansas City pharmacists stage walkouts over short-staffing

Pharmacists at two dozen CVS stores throughout metropolitan Kansas City, Missouri walked out again last week deploring a lack of adequate staff to respond to a growing backlog of prescriptions. The previous week, on September 21 and 22, one dozen CVS stores were forced to close. The

striking pharmacists anticipate even greater problems covering patient needs as they face the coming fall flu and COVID vaccine requests.

The walkouts, conducted by non-union pharmacists, caught CVS off guard and they were compelled to dispatch their chief pharmacy officer to meet with the Kansas City pharmacists. While the pandemic severely exacerbated conditions, pharmacists claim that the problem goes back 10 years, as CVS cut staff to boost profits. The problem is widespread, affecting pharmacists at drugstores across the country.

“At CVS and the other stores now there is only you and hopefully one technician in there, and as soon as the phone rings, one part of the work flow is taken out, and if the phone rings again it’s shut down completely,” Chris Adkins, an advocate and former CVS pharmacist told *Moneywatch*.

The Kansas Board of Pharmacy reports in a survey that 57 percent of pharmacists say they lack the time to do their job safely and effectively. The Kansas Pharmacists Association has come out in support of the walkouts and in a statement said, “When pharmacies are paid for the number of prescriptions that cross their counters instead of the clinical knowledge and services they provide for their patients, the system inappropriately values medication volume over safety and quality of health care.”

One of the factors in the increased workload is the role played by a handful of pharmacy benefit managers, including CVS Caremark. This handful controls 89 percent of the market where they provide the link between the insurance plans and pharmacies.

California dialysis workers conduct two-day strike

Some 500 dialysis workers carried out a two-day strike beginning September 25 at clinics across California operated by Fresenius Medical Care and Satellite Healthcare. The Service Employees International Union said the two companies had violated US labor laws by “threatening and intimidating caregivers, firing workers for trying to form a union and speaking out to improve patient care.”

The strike covered a wide variety of workers including nurses, technicians, social workers, dietitians, clinical administrative coordinators and receptionists.

Manny Gonzalez, a hemodialysis tech worker, said in a statement, “We spend more time with our patients and coworkers than our own families, and they know we are chronically understaffed and underpaid. “Fresenius is trying to keep us silent because they’re afraid of us standing together, and they know that our patients are supporting us in this fight.”

Dialysis caregivers make as little as \$17 an hour. This compares with Fresenius’ CEO, who made \$5 million in 2021, and Satellite’s CEO who raked in \$1.5 million.

Workers at two PeaceHealth hospitals in Washington state to take strike vote amid stalled contract negotiations

Over 1,000 tech, maintenance and lab workers at two PeaceHealth hospitals in Washington state will vote this week for strike authorization after months of fruitless bargaining. The Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (OFNHP), which represents the workers at the Southeast Hospital in Vancouver and the St. John facility in Longview, said that management has shown “no willingness to fix the issues” and “they don’t want to pay living wages or take any action to ensure that we have safe staffing levels.”

Workers are demanding a 40 percent increase over the life of a three-year contract to bring them up to the prevailing wages of workers at other regional facilities. The strike authorization vote will take place between October 2 and 6. The state requires a 10-day strike notice before workers can walk out.

PeaceHealth is a non-profit Catholic health system composed of 10 hospitals. In 2022 its president and CEO Elizabeth Dunne raked in a base pay of \$5.6 million, which represented a significant increase over her 2021 base pay of \$3.3 million.

Canada

Air Canada pilots picket Toronto airport

Scores of Air Canada pilots held an informational picket outside Pearson International Airport in Toronto last week to demand significant wage increases and improved working conditions. The Air Line Pilots Association organizes over 5,000 aviators at Air Canada.

The action took place as the pilot’s nine-year contract expired. That lengthy collective agreement saw the real wages of the pilots decrease significantly, as spiking inflation eroded their living standards. That contract provided for a paltry 2 percent per year wage increase in each of the nine years. The contract had initially been for a 10-year duration but a clause was activated by the union to terminate the deal one year early. Negotiations have been ongoing since this past June.

Wages for the pilots have fallen far behind those currently in place amongst major airlines in the United States. At the beginning of the contract in 2014, wages were virtually equal to those paid at Delta, United and American Airlines. Today, pilots at United Airlines earn 92 percent more than an Air Canada pilot. Aviators at Delta and American Airlines also earn substantially more. As a result, a significant exodus to the United States of pilots employed by Air Canada has taken place.

In Canada, 1,800 pilots at the country’s second largest airline, WestJet, recently settled on a new contract that provided for a 24 percent increase spread out over the next four years.



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