

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

On Thursday, November 23, the Plaza de Mayo mothers of those who were butchered by the military in the 1970s and 80s, to repudiate the policy proposals of newly elected president Javier Milei. The protesters, who rallied across from Argentina's government house in Buenos Aires, called on the trade unions to resist Milei's neo-liberal corporatist proposals, including the pardon of military personnel convicted of crimes against humanity during the dictatorship.

The protesters also commemorated Hebe Bonafini, one of the main leaders of the fight to uncover the truth and demand the release of the 30,000 "disappeared" during the dictatorship. Milei and his vice president claim the above figure is an exaggeration.

On Wednesday, November 22, Uruguayan educators launched a 24-hour protest strike to defend the existing education and wage structures in Uruguayan public schools. The strike, which included a mass rally in downtown Montevideo, denounced government austerity measures aimed at the nation's public schools. In addition to wage cuts, the current government plans across-the-board sackings of school personnel.

Hundreds of youth marched in the port city of Valparaiso on November 18 to commemorate four years since the 2019 rebellion. As in 2019, the protesters denounced socioeconomic inequality in Chile. The conditions of 2019 that caused the youth rebellion (lack of housing, increasing prices for food, health and public utilities, etc.) have not only not improved, they have gotten worse. At the same time, real wages and pensions have drastically declined.

November 18, 2019 marked the 30th day of mass

protests in Santiago and other Chilean cities, that had been triggered by increases in transit fares, have transformed into a repudiation of the Chilean constitution that had been imposed by the Pinochet dictatorship. The constitution has yet to be changed.

The demonstrators marched behind a banner that read, "as long as there is misery, there will be rebellion!"

The marchers reached the city's Salvador Allende square, but were stopped by Chilean gendarmes, police vehicles and water cannons. Central Valparaiso was blanketed with tear gas, as marchers took alternate routes.

On November 22, striking teachers, members of the National Union of High School Teachers (SINTCB), blocked streets in Mexico City demanding a wage increase of 20 percent. The SINTCB, represents teachers at 18 high schools.

The high school educators and other employees went on strike November 16.

In the working class districts of Xochimilco and Iztapalapa the Morena administration of Marti Batres sent police to repress the protesting educators.

United States

Over 500 nurses at the Ascension St. Joseph Hospital in Joliet, Illinois, returned to work November 25 after a two-day strike followed by a two-day management lockout. Nurses carried out a similar walkout back in August to press for better compensation and safe staffing ratios as contract talks, beginning back in May, have been gridlocked since the old agreement expired in July.

No agreement was forthcoming as a result of the limited strike and hospital management has set back negotiations until December 8. Ascension used a private contractor to replace nurses during the strike. The Illinois Nurses Association estimates the cost per nurse for the four-day period was \$7,000, plus food, travel and lodging. The

Chicago Tribune cited one nurse, Vera Appiah-Dankwah, who calculated that the payout to a replacement nurse was more than she makes in a month.

Nurses are also opposed to a wage scale proposal by management that tapers off for nurses with higher seniority. The result is that veteran nurses are leaving for other regional hospitals that provide higher compensation.

Ascension Health, which manages the hospital, cut the nursing staff from 850 to 500 during the course of the last five years. Staffing for intensive care has been halved. Ascension is the second largest private healthcare system in the United States in terms of hospitals, with 142. During the 2010s, its CEOs typically raked in more than \$10 million a year. In 2017, president and CEO Anthoy Tersigni received \$13,627,686.

The 86 workers represented by three unions at the Woodland Pulp mill in Baileyville, Maine, voted to accept the most recent contract offer after more than a month on strike over the company's attempt to tear up classifications for millwrights, pipefitters, machinists and auto mechanic positions and substitute a general mechanic classification. The new agreement ended a two-tier vacation policy and provides other changes in terms of paid sick leave and a ratification bonus of \$750.

On the issue of job classifications, it is not clear what the ramifications of the agreement will be. According to WABI, "All current journeymen maintenance employees will have the option to be placed in the A2 GM classification, receiving an immediate 11.6 percent wage increase." Those not choosing this option will receive an increase of 3 percent. Other general wage increases over the course of a three-year contract will be a miserly 4 percent in the first year with 3 percent in years two and three.

In the week previous to the settlement, workers voted down a tentative offer. Then, on Monday, November 20, workers from the Bath Iron Works joined strikers on the picket line. The company called the police and five workers were arrested. This incident apparently set in motion an agreement between the company and the three unions—the International Association of Machinists, Millwrights Union and Service Employees International Union.

Back on October 16, a salaried worker ran into two workers on the picket line. Maine Senate President Troy Jackson, who was on the picket line as the incident transpired, told Maine Public Radio, "This car just kept on coming ... she never stopped. She tried to push them out of the way with her vehicle..."

Canada

A tentative agreement reached between the City of Winnipeg, Manitoba and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1505 was rejected by the more than 1,000 members of the union that includes bus drivers and mechanics in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It was the second rejection of a deal placed before the membership and recommended by the union leadership.

Workers have been without a new contract since January 7.

The previous contract, which was barely passed in 2019, awarded a paltry 7 percent in wage increases spread over four years. The inflationary spike of 2022 alone slashed workers' wages in real terms below the level in 2019 when the contract began.

Just prior to the expiration of the previous deal last January, workers voted to oust their local president, Romeo Ignacio, and install current ATU president Chris Scott. Workers had pushed Ignacio aside because a majority felt he did not fight for their demands aggressively enough. The new president Scott had promised a more aggressive stance.

However, despite demands from the rank and file for a new contract that addresses onerous working conditions and scheduling practices, serious safety concerns as well as unsatisfactory wages, the ATU leadership did not move forward with any strike action after the first contract rejection. Even now, with their proposed deal with city management rejected for a second time, Scott has only advised workers to reject offers of voluntary overtime beginning this week.

The practice of unions forcing revotes on previously rejected earlier offers is not limited to the experience of Winnipeg transit workers. Only last week Hamilton transit workers, members of the ATU, ratified a deal that was virtually the same as one already voted down prior to the launch of a seven-day strike earlier this month.



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