

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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Latin America

The Railroad Fraternity, the main railroad workers union in Argentina, announced last Friday that railroad workers would walk out this Wednesday. The main demand is for wage increases to meet the cost of accelerating inflation.

The RR Fraternity announcement took place following mass protests in Buenos Aires by thousands of workers demanding increases in wages. The right-wing administration of President Javier Milei has ignored all wage demands and salary negotiations with the government-owned railroads have collapsed.

The call by the Railroad Fraternity reflects the opposition of tens of thousands of railroad workers and millions of Argentine workers over the decimation of the purchasing power of their wages by rampaging inflation, especially in respect to food, fuel and rents.

Last Thursday the Milei administration declared that there would be no government-mandated increases in wages or price controls for basic necessities (food, fuel, housing, utilities), declaring that these would be set by free markets through supply and demand. Public transit subsidies and subsidies to provincial government have been canceled.

The trade unions are demanding that the monthly minimum wage be set at US\$345, up from the current US\$186. The Milei administration has declared that there is “no money” and private corporations have rejected any increases.

Carnival week celebrations in Ayacucho, in southern Peru, turned into political protests last Wednesday against the authoritarian Dina Boluarte regime, in memory to all the victims of this dictatorship since President Pedro Castillo was deposed by parliament on December 7, 2022. According to one estimate, apart from thousands of missing and imprisoned, at least 65 have been killed and hundreds have been injured.

Last week, on the third day of the traditional pre-Easter carnival march through the heart of the city, peasant crowds carried images and effigies condemning the Boluarte government and demanding the release of workers and peasants

jailed since protests began last year.

The use of Carnival days as a means of political protest is not new in Latin America.

On Wednesday, despite repeated attempts by national police (Policía Nacional del Perú) using tear gas to separate the protesters from the Carnival march, the demonstrators managed to push through as the crowd began voicing and singing chants condemning the regime.

Since Castillo’s fall, there have been constant protests, mostly concentrated in southern Peru and in Lima, the nation’s capital, by peasants, impoverished sections of workers and students.

United States

Workers at Marathon Petroleum’s Detroit refinery voted by a 90 percent majority to authorize a strike last week, according to Teamsters Local 283. The contract for 273 workers expired January 31. The workers include board operators, field operators, chemists, laboratory technicians, electricians and mechanics.

According to Local 283 officials, the workers are demanding a 20 percent wage increase in the face of inflation that has devastated their living standards. However, negotiations are continuing and the Teamsters have not issued a strike deadline.

The Biden administration has worked closely with union executives to impose sellout contracts on oil refinery workers to keep profits high and petroleum flowing.

The last strike by workers at the refinery was 20 years ago and lasted 90 days. Marathon has threatened to continue production using outside workers if a strike takes place. Local residents have complained for years over air quality in the area around the refinery, which emits toxic pollutants such as sulfur dioxide.

Safety is a major issue at US oil refineries. In May 2023, Scott Higgins, 55, died in an explosion at the Marathon Galveston Bay refinery in Texas City, Texas. A March 2005 explosion at the same refinery, then owned by BP, killed 15 people and injured 180.

Hotel workers in Southern California are still engaged in contract struggles and strikes as only 34 of some 70 hotels

represented by Unite Here Local 11 have settled agree, emts. It has come to light that one of the holdout hotels in Los Angeles, the Hyatt Regency LAX, is owned by the Southwest Carpenters Pension Trust and trustees serving on the pension's board are executives of the Carpenters Union.

Local 11 has not made public the details of the status of negotiations at the hotel except to say workers are demanding an immediate \$5 an hour wage increase followed by increases to keep pace with inflation, quality health insurance and a pension. Workers are also seeking contract language to restrain management's drive to increase workloads.

The pension fund bought Hyatt Regency LAX in 2021 for \$75 million and hired Aimbridge Hospitality to run it. Aimbridge ranks as the largest third-party hotel operator in the world with over 1,500 hotels in its global portfolio. The Carpenters Union has declined to comment on the situation.

Most of the Unite Here union's criticism has been reserved for Aimbridge. Kurt Petersen, co-president of Local 11, called Aimbridge's offer "cheap and inferior." The struggle reveals the stark divide between the wealthy union apparatus and the interests of workers they purport to represent.

Flight attendants at Alaska Airlines have voted by a near unanimous 99.48 percent margin to grant strike authorization according to the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA.

Thousands of flight attendants held informational pickets February 14 at more than 30 airports across the United States. Some 100,000 flight attendants are involved in ongoing contract negotiations with United Airlines, Southwest Airlines, Alaska Airlines, Air Wisconsin, American Airlines, Omni Air and Frontier.

Already, the 26,000 flight attendants at American Airlines have authorized strike action by 99 percent. Alaska Airlines and Air Wisconsin attendants also voted by 99 percent, while American Eagle attendants voted by 98 percent for a strike.

Flight attendants have been egregiously exploited by the airlines with countless stories of attendants having to rely on food stamps, lacking pay increases to combat inflation and suffering layoffs during the pandemic as well as the attending health issues due to COVID.

Canada

With a near unanimous vote to ratify strike action by about 700 communications, electrical and signal workers at the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), workers have set into motion a countdown to the first strike on the city's bus and subway network since industrial action was outlawed by the former Liberal provincial government in 2011. Forced to accept substandard contracts since 2011, these TTC infrastructure workers are determined to make significant gains in wages and

conditions.

TTC workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2, have been without a contract since March 2022. Initial bargaining discussions with TTC management have produced insulting wage increase offers of 1 percent per year, with demands for other concessions in shift premiums, overtime payments and working conditions.

In addition to this brewing dispute, on March 31 about 13,000 mechanics, maintenance workers and bus and subway drivers, members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 113, will see their current contract expire. They too will be able to launch strike action at the TTC for the first time since 2011 should they be unable to negotiate a new agreement.

On May 8, 2023, the Ontario Superior Court of Justice finally ruled on an action brought both by the ATU and CUPE. The court struck down the anti-strike legislation passed 13 years ago as unconstitutional.

The initial legislation followed bitter disputes in the TTC. In 1999 a two-day strike across the entire system was sabotaged by the Ontario New Democratic Party and the ATU leadership who forced workers into binding arbitration. In 2008, another strike which had ground the city to a near standstill ended abruptly when the NDP joined with the other two parties in the legislature to unanimously pass an emergency back-to-work order.

These events sparked the blanket anti-strike law that was imposed before workers could take up the fight again in 2011.

So worried was TTC management (and their allies in the Conservative government) about the implications of this summer's court ruling that they appealed to the court to delay the restoration of the right to strike until after this year's CUPE and ATU contracts were concluded. The court declined. The Conservative government nonetheless retains the weapon of "situational" back-to-work legislation in its anti-worker legal arsenal.



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