

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

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## Argentine airline workers strike over wages

On Wednesday, February 28, workers employed by Aerolíneas Argentinas went on strike for a day in response to the price explosion in the country. The Aeronautical unions APA, APLA and UPSA had rejected an offer for a 12 percent salary increase for March salaries (to be paid in the first days of April). The unions declared that airline workers face a 70 percent gap in real wages, below inflation.

The protest strike lasted only one day.

Airline executives cynically denounced the strike, saying it had affected about 24,000 passengers and impacted many workers that indirectly depend on airline operations, but said nothing about the conditions that airline workers face.

On Thursday, Buenos Aires airline workers will protest at the Ministry of Economics. Aerolíneas Argentinas, the largest airline in Argentina, is state-owned.

## Argentine educators stage national protest strike in opposition to the Milei government

The Confederation of Education Workers of the Argentine Republic (Ctera) carried out a one-day protest strike on Monday to demand a salary increase and to oppose budget cuts made by the government of fascist President Javier Milei. The protest strike was also aimed at pressuring Congress to oppose the elimination of the National Teacher Incentive Fund (Fonid) and the Salary Compensation Fund.

In the city of Buenos Aires, teachers rallied in front of the Ministry of Education.

## Ecuador: Victims of kidney disease protest destruction of health services

Ecuadorians with kidney failure mobilized February 29 demanding health care for patients in need of lifesaving dialysis and denounced the lack of a budget for health services. The demonstration took place in front of the Ministry of Health. The protesters insisted that health is a human and democratic right.

They say health services are being starved of government funds. The government owes providers more than US\$125 million, since it stopped payments in 2023. Many protesters carried signs that said, “We are on the

brink of death!”

Ecuador’s President Daniel Noboa had declared that 92 percent of health centers have been funded, a claim that is contradicted by doctors across the country.

## Workers strike hardwood fabrication plant in West Virginia

Some 500 workers at the AHF Products plant in Beverly, West Virginia walked off the job February 25 after voting down a tentative agreement the day before. Members of Teamsters Local 175 are demanding increased pay along with a better insurance package. But harassment and the badgering of workers by foremen is also a major issue.

“We are striking because of the way they treat people, along with unfair wages and unfair insurance,” a worker told Inter-Mountain. “Some of the supervisors here treat the employees pretty badly. When you have 20-plus year employees leaving and going somewhere else, there’s something wrong. The way they treat people, it’s unreal—it’s crammed down your throat and out your backside every day.”

AHF Products Chief Operating Officer Jake Loftis complained that a “narrow plurality” of workers had defeated the contract. “We felt really good about it, as did the bargaining committee.”

The company called the proposal “the largest economic package” in the plant’s history. However, workers faulted the agreement because it didn’t take into account inflation.

## Contract expires for Akron, Ohio, nurses; union blocks strike

The contract covering 800 nurses at the Cleveland Clinic Akron General in Akron, Ohio, expired February 28, however the Professional Staff Nurses Association (PSNA) has said it will not call a strike and instead will begin an informational picket March 6 if there is not agreement with management.

While nurses are demanding better pay, maternity leave and improved retirement benefits, safe staffing ratios are their major concern. Hospital management has refused to make any commitments relative to staffing.

Currently, legislation has been introduced in the Ohio legislature which purports to require hospitals to establish mandatory staffing plans. The bill recommends a minimum of four patients for every nurse. However, such bills have typically been laden with escape clauses that allow hospital management to skirt safe staffing ratios.

## Saskatchewan teachers continue historic job action

On Monday, February 26, teachers at seven of the 27 local organizations of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF) staged a limited one-day rotating strike at the province's legislature in Regina. On Tuesday, teachers across the province also withdrew extracurricular supports across the province.

Key issues at stake include crowded classrooms, an increase in split grades, and fewer supports for struggling students.

This year, Saskatchewan teachers have taken part in a historic number of strikes and other job actions. On January 16 and 22, roughly 13,000 teachers engaged in one-day, province-wide strikes when negotiations with the province hit a wall. On February 1, five locals of the STF launched a third day of rotating strikes at school boards across the province. Additionally, teachers and community members picketed and rallied at 35 "demonstration sites" across the province on the second day of strike action.

The last contract struggle took place in 2011. The strike lasted just three days before it was shut down by the STF, which embraced a concessions contract recommended by a government-appointed "special mediator," Richard Hornung. Only two-thirds of the province's 12,600 teachers voted in favour of the agreement, which included a general wage hike of a measly 5.5 percent over three years.

Hornung has a lengthy track record in helping the province impose concessions contracts. In 2016, he mediated a contract between the province and the striking Union of Nurses which resulted in lump-sum payments of up to \$800 for each of the fiscal years of 2014 and 2015, following by 1.5 percent increases the two following years—utterly pathetic increases.

The province's pro-austerity hard-right government of Scott Moe has repeatedly displayed open contempt for the needs and protections of teachers and their students. In January, minister of education Jeremy Cockrill made clear that the issue of class sizes and complexity is "a line in the sand" that his government will not budge on.

### **Quebec liquor store workers vote to strike**

Over 5,000 liquor store workers at *Société des alcools du Québec* (SAQ) in Quebec have voted in favour of strike action after a year of negotiations reached an impasse.

In a recent series of general assemblies, 89 percent of participating workers voted in favour of a strike mandate. Despite overwhelming support for job action, the *Syndicat des employés de magasins et de bureaux de la Société des alcools du Québec* union has only approved a limited walkout totaling 15 days. It's not clear if all 15 days will be used or whether they would be consecutive.

Workers' key demands include wage increases, job stability, the conversion of part-time jobs into full-time positions, and predictable working hours. According to union statements, a staggering 70 percent of SAQ employees are subjected to the uncertainties of part-time work, with schedules that are often unknown until two weeks in advance. Part-time workers are not entitled to essential benefits or insurance coverage.

SAQ management has made clear its refusal to meet workers' demands, preempting the potential strike with contingency plans to maintain services in their absence.

### **GreenShield Canada workers mount first ever strike**

Five hundred eighty workers at an Ontario non-profit health insurance organization have begun an indefinite strike. Members from Unifor Local 240 located in Windsor and Local 673 located in Toronto, which include adjudicators, call centre representatives, and administrative roles among others, walked out Friday at midnight.

Their employer, GreenShield Canada, has refused to meet the strikers' demands for wage increases, job security and job protections against the contracting out of work. The union and the company had initiated discussions on a new collective agreement in mid-January, six weeks before the last contract expired at the end of February. According to Local 240 chairperson Bastien Stedman, no new talks are planned.

This is the first time in the 65 years of GreenShield's existence that a strike has been mounted.

### **Yukon hospital union rushes to ink tentative contract to avert strike**

On Friday, the day after 400 hospital workers in the northwest territory of Yukon voted overwhelmingly in favour of a strike, their union rapidly announced that it had reached a tentative agreement with the provincial government employer. Not one single detail has been released, yet the bargaining team announced that the contract is a "strong deal."

Members of the Yukon Employees Union (YEU), which include custodial and security staff, lab technologists, and licensed practical nurses located in Whitehorse, Watson Lake and Dawson City, have been working without a contract since September 2022. Their demands include higher wages and better working conditions. Last November, the YEU applied for conciliation to help address "outstanding monetary matters."

The tentative agreement reached with the Yukon Hospital Corporation has yet to be ratified by the membership. Nor has any date been set for employees to vote on the new contract. If it is rejected, industrial action could begin as early as March 26.

YEU president Justin Lemphers has made clear that if negotiations reached an impasse, job action would be limited. "There's a multitude of options that are available to the union membership in determining what kind of action that can be taken," he stated on Thursday when the strike mandate passed. "It doesn't mean that necessarily that there's going to be a picket."

Yukon hospitals suffer from chronic staffing shortages, service delays, and increased reliance on agency nurses to cope with increased demand. Last year, the Yukon Hospital Corporation capped medical imaging and cut surgical services by one-third to "stay within its budget so that it doesn't fall into a larger deficit" according to a spokesperson.

### **Scab labour used against striking workers at east coast vehicle import hub**

Management at one of North America's largest transshipment facilities for imported vehicles has brought in scab labour to run services during the strike by hundreds of its workers.

Last Tuesday, 240 workers at the Autoport vehicle processing facility in East Passage, Nova Scotia walked off the job after a month of bargaining broke down. Unifor Atlantic regional director said the preparation of replacement labour is evidence Autoport had no intention of reaching a deal on Monday.

According to a collective bargaining agreement with Autoport that expired this past December, workers at the facility earn between \$22.30

and \$33.06 an hour after probation. The union rejected the offer of a meagre 8 percent wage increase over three years, which is nowhere near the rate of inflation.

CN-owned Autoport is one of North America's largest vehicle processing and transshipment hubs, handling close to 185,000 vehicles annually.



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