

Argentine strike wave continues; Edmonton, Alberta civic workers vote down contract offer

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

In recent weeks, Argentine unions have called strikes by teachers, aeronautical workers, railway workers and others to put forward salary demands due to high inflation and economic policies promoted by President Javier Milei.

- River-boat operators and crews in Buenos Aires province struck following a legally mandated cooling-off period. The struggle is over wages. They may be joined by river workers in Santa Fe province, which borders Buenos Aires, along the Parana River, whose cooling-off period expires on March 15. Ships that are still sailing will dock at their destination and download their cargo, with the strikers remaining on board during the duration of the work stoppage.

- On March 7 transit workers in metropolitan Buenos Aires carried out their second strike this month. The strike is over unpaid wages and wage increases. The trade unions that represent transit workers defined the underlying wage issue as the protection of workers' buying power.

Thousands of women marched in Quito on March 8 (International Women's Day). The demonstrators denounced the rise of contingent employment, due to the economic policies of current president Daniel Noboa. The demonstrators also carried signs condemning the ongoing Gaza genocide.

The demonstrators rallied in Quito's historic San Francisco Square. At the rally, women read manifestos denouncing Noboa's policies, violence against women and conditions of increasing misery and poverty.

Workers employed by the Uruguayan Ministry of Social Development mobilized on March 4 against increasing the use of temporary workers, gig workers and the use of zero-hours contracts that are at the root of increasing levels of poverty and homelessness across society—all made possible by the ministry. The number of homeless in Montevideo has increased exponentially since 2020.

In addition, according to a recent estimate, 9 percent of individuals in Uruguay (in 2 percent of households) are not able to afford to buy enough food to support a healthy life.

United States

Legal service workers walked out on an indefinite strike February 26

against Mobilization for Justice (MFJ), a New York City agency that offers free legal services to low-income workers facing evictions, disability and immigration issues. The 110 members of Legal Services Staff Association (LSSA) Local 2320 voted by 93 percent three days earlier to reject the latest contract that came up short on wages, healthcare benefits and more flexibility for remote work.

The bargaining unit is comprised of attorneys, paralegals, support staff, receptionists and front desk workers who believe insufficient staff, growing workloads and wages failing to keep up with inflation are causing burnout and placing them in the same economic hardship as many of the clients they serve.

Housing attorney Nikita Salehi-Azhan told *Amsterdam News*, "I know that other nonprofits recently negotiated 7 percent raises, so to be offered 2 percent is, obviously, very disrespectful and not anywhere close to bringing us back to where we were pre-inflation."

Tara Joy, a housing intake specialist speaking of the overwhelming workload, told *City Limits*, "I can see that, frankly, my colleagues are drowning in just the sheer volume of intakes that they have to do."

A spokesperson for MFJ responded to the strike, pointing to "fiscal realities" and telling workers to "reconsider the generosity of MFJ's offer..."

About 100 St. Louis, Missouri, school bus drivers called in sick February 26 and 27 to protest the placing of a noose at the workstation of Amin Mitchell, a black bus mechanic. Mitchell made a Facebook post including a picture of a noose.

Previous to the provocation, Mitchell made a complaint to the contracting company Missouri Central Bus Company's human resources department concerning a supervisor who ordered him to only implement quick fixes to brakes on buses in order to pass inspection. Mitchell ended up in an altercation with management when he protested that the brakes needed to be replaced. When Mitchell came in to work February 22, he found a noose on the floor of his work station.

"That's a message that says, 'If you don't stop doing what you're doing, something bad is going to happen right away,'" Mitchell told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

The St. Louis chapter of the NAACP looked into the matter and branch president Adolphus Pruitt, stated, "Missouri Central Bus Company shop is one that is ... racially charged and is dysfunctional." One bus mechanic testified to bad brake systems, faulty parts and occasions where buses have caught fire. In addition, there has been racial harassment, as well as dirty and sexist jokes polluting the work environment.

Workers at the outdoor recreational equipment retailer REI walked off the job March 1 on a two-day strike in Maple Grove, Minnesota. Members of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 663 are protesting the company's decision to rescind the payment of merit raises and summit payout for 2024. According to Local 663, some nine stores have axed merit raises. Besides the Maple Grove store, workers are also

striking in Chicago and New York.

The UFCW attempted to resolve the issue but REI declined to discuss it, leading to the walkout. REI's only response was that they are "committed to continuing to bargain in good faith..."

The Maple Grove REI store was among the first to unionize in May of last year.

Canada

Following the near-unanimous strike vote on Thursday by some 350 support workers at northern Ontario's transportation service, Unifor Local 103 announced that it has reached a tentative agreement with the province's crown corporation, averting a strike planned for Tuesday.

Although the details of the contract will not be released until it is presented to members for ratification—which the union said could happen as early as Tuesday—Unifor Local 103 President Jeremy Rodgers announced that the tentative agreement "shows the true value of our members" and its bargaining committee will be "unanimously recommending" acceptance of the tentative agreement.

On March 6, the support workers, who include clerks, bus mechanics and retail, onboard dining and warehousing staff at Ontario Northland, voted 96.3 percent in favour of strike action. At issue are benefits, wages and overall working conditions. Ontario Northland is owned by the Ontario government, responsible for providing transportation services for passengers and goods in northern Ontario.

Discussions between the union and Ontario Northland have been underway since the contract expired last summer. Following the rejection of the province's latest proposal by the union's bargaining committee in December, the union agreed to the appointment of a federal conciliator and a provincial mediator to manage the negotiations, which have no doubt set terms favourable to the province.

In response to the strike vote last week, Unifor national president Lana Payne stated, "It's disheartening to see the disparity between the treatment of our hardworking members and the executive level's payout." Indeed, according to the 2022 Sunshine List, Ontario Northland president and interim president Corina Moore and Chad Evans raked in hefty salaries of almost \$400,000 and over \$260,000 respectively. Conversely, the average salary of a clerk hovers around \$45,000 according to jobs website Glassdoor.

Some 5,000 civic workers in Edmonton have overwhelmingly rejected the city's latest proposed contract terms, placing them in a strike position as early as this week. After last Friday's vote tally, nearly 88 percent of eligible workers in Civic Service Union (CSU) Local 52 returned ballots marked with a "no" to the municipal employer's "best and final offer." (Workers at the Edmonton Public Library represented by the same union did not participate in the proposal vote.)

The latest ballot was imposed by the Alberta Labour Relations Board, which last month approved the city's application that required its contract proposal to be voted on directly by workers, bypassing the union's role in the bargaining process.

CSU Local 52 city workers haven't had a raise in six years and have been without a contract since 2020. Local President Lanny Chudyk admitted that the union had put forth a wage proposal far below the cost of living and inflation. Still, the city has been unwilling to meet even these modest demands, offering an insulting 7.25 percent wage increase over five years, with raises set at 0, 1, 2, 2, and 2.25 percent each year to 2025.

In February, workers categorically rejected this paltry offering and the overwhelming majority voted to strike. A rally was staged outside Edmonton City Hall with workers chanting, "no zeros!"

Despite the city's claim that its pathetic wage increase is "compelling" in light of its "current financial realities," the mayor and city council gave themselves a 2.4 percent raise in 2023, after a two-year freeze, making it the second highest paid council in the country.

According to the city, the average CSU Local 52 civic worker's salary is \$86,000. However, the union explains that this figure is misleading because many employees' wage classifications are paid at a much lower rate, including those of fitness instructors and 911 dispatchers—some of the city's lowest-paid employees. According to the union, some of its members earn so little that they have turned to food banks for aid.

A strike by workers at North America's oldest retailer has entered its fifth month with no end in sight. Negotiations between USW Local 1-417 and the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) at the Kamloops, British Columbia location stalled in January and neither side has returned to the table to discuss new terms.

The union has been in negotiations with HBC since July 2023, but the company has point-blank refused to move on its concessions demands, which among other things, include a paltry 1 percent wage increase for each contract year, a drop in real wages when inflation is considered. Forty-year veteran worker Angie Bains, told CBC News that HBC's initial offer was even more pathetic—a wage increase of just 17 cents an hour, which she likened to a "slap in the face."

According to the most recent contract, which expired last May, many of the retail positions pay little more than the province's legal minimum hourly wage, which is currently set at \$17.40. The conservative figure for a livable wage in Kamloops in 2023 was \$20.91 an hour.

The Kamloops department store has been closed since the strike began on December 10, with workers concerned that waning sales in the retail environment more generally might prompt its permanent closure. Last year, HBC slashed 2 percent of its workforce, roughly 500 employees, mainly located in Canada, in a bid to "streamline operations." Meanwhile, it holds a commercial real estate portfolio valued at close to \$7 billion (USD).

The largest health care strike in Manitoba in over a decade is underway. Last Wednesday, 160 healthcare support workers at supportive housing provider Ten Ten Sinclair in Winnipeg officially walked off the job, demanding wage increases that keep pace with the cost of living.

A statement released by Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) of Manitoba stated that workers at the municipally funded independent living facility have seen their wages increase by only 1.75% since 2016, while the cost of living has increased by 25 percent. According to the Canada Job Bank, the median wage for the position of care aide in the Winnipeg area is just \$19.25 an hour.



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