

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Strikes and protests increase in Argentina opposing massive cuts

Movie production workers

Last week the Milei administration removed of funding for the National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts (INCAA), impacting over 5,000 movie production workers. The move was denounced by writer-director Benjamin Naishtat, who declared: “This cruel measure against the movie industry is because it is a sector that is not aligned with [Milei’s] political proposals that consider culture, particularly the cinema, enemies and scapegoats.”

Milei had announced plans to close INCAA and the nation’s film schools in January, but had postponed the measure in part due to the reaction of international award-winning film actors and directors, including Spain’s Pedro Almodóvar and Aki Kaurismaki from Finland and in the latest Berlin Film Festival.

In reaction to the announcement, thousands rallied in front of the historic Gaumont Movie Theatre in central Buenos Aires at a press conference called by the entertainment union ATE-INCAA and the United for Culture Organization. It was addressed by actors, directors, technical workers, documentary producers and students who denounced this latest political attack on the working class and culture.

The press conference was interrupted after two hours by police tear-gas attacks, despite the resistance of the protesters. The elimination of state funding to INCAA ends financial support for film schools and festivals across the country. Similar protests took place in other Argentine cities in which INCAA operated, including Rosario and Cordoba. Another mass protest in defense of culture is planned for March 23.

University workers strike

For the first time in the country’s history, on Thursday March 14, university workers shut down all of Argentina’s 57 national universities. The strike had been called by all the unions representing educators and non-teaching workers. At issue are hunger level wages, deteriorating working conditions, and opposition to attacks on education by the Milei administration. Since Milei took power, consumer prices have gone up 70 percent, while wages went up only 16 percent.

President Milei routinely accuses schools and universities of indoctrinating students and proposed setting up telephone lines for students to denounce their educators to government authorities. The Milei government is already carrying out major cuts in scholarship, housing and food funds for students.

Hundreds in Mexico protest police killing of student

Two thousand students, educators and workers marched on Saturday, March 17 in Guerrero state demanding justice over the assassination of Ayotzinapa teaching college student Yanqui Kothan Gomez Peralta. He was killed by police officers by a shot to the head for no apparent reason. At the time of his death, Peralta was sitting in his parked car, waiting for a passenger to make a purchase at a convenience store.

The demonstrators also held signs demanding justice for the 43 teaching school students who disappeared, and presumed dead, in 2014, in the same state.

Contract settlement reached for Hawaii hotel workers after one-day strike

The union representing workers at the Ilikai Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii, reached a tentative agreement with management after ten hours on the picket line March 8. According to Unite Here Local 5, the Ilikai Hotel workers achieved wage parity with other Waikiki hotels after enduring more than five years without a contract.

“We make \$8 less than the rest of Waikiki hotels,” said Merlinda Castro, a housekeeper at the Ilikai Hotel. “Living in Hawaii is so expensive. Living paycheck to paycheck, I cannot afford to support my family.”

The tentative contract brings back automatic daily guest room cleaning, a measure suspended during the pandemic. A majority of other Waikiki hotels had already resumed this policy.

Unite Here claimed a few improvements in the contract, but details are sketchy. A union communication merely stated, “Retirement with dignity,” without spelling out the actual improvement.

Unite Here contracts covering nearly 7,000 workers are set to expire this year.

Contract ratification ends week-long strike by Iron Range city workers

Workers for the town of Virginia, Minnesota, the third largest in the Iron Range, returned to work March 13 after unanimously ratifying a new labor agreement the previous evening to conclude a week-long strike. Scott DaRonco, president of Local 454 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) declared the union wasn’t “asking for a lot” and this appeared to be the case as the workers will receive a cumulative 10.5 percent wage increase over the course of the new three-year contract.

The ratified contract was first presented back on February 27 and Local 454 leaders accepted it and were about to present it to the 79 members of the bargaining unit when the city suddenly revoked the agreement. According to reports, an earlier vote by the City Council to approve a 4

percent levy increase for 2024 appeared to torpedo the agreement. A minority of city councilors who voted against the agreement conceded the levy was insufficient to properly run the city.

Previous to the contract, the city had reduced staff, claiming budget constraints. This led to the need to require overtime of the remaining workers. The City Council then imposed restrictions to deny overtime.

During the work stoppage, strikers held three silent vigils outside the homes of city councilors for 30 minutes or less. The city responded by passing an emergency ordinance banning targeted residential picketing.

Quebec Airbus A220 workers reject contract, approve strike mandate

On Sunday, March 17, one thousand plus Airbus A220 production workers in Quebec rejected Airbus' latest offer, described as "totally unacceptable" by the union representing them, and voted in favour of a strike mandate.

Members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), representing 1,300 out of 3,000 workers at Airbus' Mirabel plant in Montreal, voted 99.6 percent to reject the contract and 98.9 percent in favour of a strike. Union members include mechanics, toolmakers, welders, and technicians.

Their previous 5-year contract expired on December 31. Eighty-two percent of AIMTA members participated in the vote on Airbus' proposed three-year contract, which contains a derisory 10.3 percent salary increase, well below the rate of inflation, in addition to cuts to insurance coverage and pensions.

Workers are demanding real improvements in these areas in addition to the redress of issues around job security, work schedule flexibility, shift and assignment bonuses, and time-off.

Saskatchewan teachers' union pushes for binding arbitration to shut down strike and impose concessions contract

The union representing 13,000 striking teachers in Saskatchewan is cooking up another sellout by appealing to the province for the contract to be sent to anti-democratic binding arbitration.

On Thursday, the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation (STF) president Samantha Becotte cynically announced that her union was putting forward a "fair, objective and neutral path to resolve this single-issue dispute." Binding arbitration is neither fair nor neutral. It is a mechanism by which non-negotiable contract terms, rigged in favor of the employer, are forced onto workers without their vote.

Saskatchewan teachers began their strike on January 22 after working without a contract since August 2023 and months of negotiations hit a dead end. Key concerns in the dispute revolve around issues of class size and complexity—the province's "line in the sand"—which have been compounding from decades of provincial funding cuts.

In 2011, the first walk-out by Saskatchewan teachers in 78 years lasted only three days before the union embraced recommendations by a government-appointed "special mediator" which resulted in a general wage hike of a measly 5.5 percent over three years. Subsequent contract settlements have only exacerbated the issue of class size and complexity.

Within hours, the province rejected Becotte's binding arbitration proposal (under the current Saskatchewan law, both parties must agree before binding arbitration can proceed). With a general election coming up in the fall and a 54 percent approval rating, the pro-austerity hard-right government of Scott Moe is not yet ready to commit such a direct attack on the democratic rights of the widely supported teachers, preferring instead to utilise the STF to wrangle out a deal by other underhanded means.

Edmonton city workers' union hails city's latest dismal contract proposal to delay strike

On Thursday, March 14, a sellout deal was agreed to by the City of Edmonton and Civic Service Union 52 (CSU 52) and the City of Edmonton, quashing a strike that was set to take place the following day.

Some 5,000 library, clerical, technical, administrative and other civic workers, forced to work without a contract for five years, had planned to walk off the job Thursday after months of negotiations reached an impasse. A statement by the Coalition of Edmonton Civic Unions (CECU) released on Wednesday stated that the city's administration "cannot be trusted to bargain constructively." However, the following morning, CSU 52 delayed strike action for 24 hours, and that evening announced that a new deal had been reached. To preempt another contract rejection, CSU 52 President Chudyk told the media on Friday, "I'm pretty certain that we will be able to have these ratified."

Under the new tentative contract, workers would receive a paltry 6.25 percent raise over the course of the contract (a lump sum payment of \$1,000 for 2021, and 1.25 percent, 2 percent, 3 percent for the next 3 years to 2024). The terms are more or less a reorganisation of the city's previous "best and final" offer made earlier this month, a pathetic 7.25 percent increase over 5 years that workers had rejected out of hand. That rotten deal was only presented to the membership when the Alberta Labour Relations Board granted the city's application to override the union's bargaining committee and force the rank-and-file to vote on it directly.

On Wednesday, in a display of utter spinelessness, the CSU 52 pleaded with Edmonton City Council to intervene on the side of their employees before the hard-right United Conservative Party provincial government steps in to suppress those workers' wages and strip them of their bargaining rights. An open letter signed by a number of provincial unions states that the council "wittingly or unwittingly, [is] being used by the provincial UCP government to 'road test' a back-to-work strategy on City of Edmonton employees that will then be turned against the other 250,000 Alberta public sector workers whose collective agreements expire this year," according to the letter's authors.

Last week, city manager Andre Corbould cynically warned local homeowners that the union's modest proposal of 12.5 percent over five years would result in property tax hikes. He neglected to mention the automatic 2.4 percent increase the city councillors had paid themselves this year, boosting their base salary to over \$122,000, making them the second highest-paid council in Canada. The base salary this year for Edmonton Mayor Amarjeet Sohi is a generous \$216,585, while many city workers make as little as \$45,000 a year.

Union shuts down planned strike by Nova Scotia community college faculty and support staff

On Thursday, March 15, following months of fruitless negotiations, 85 percent of more than 200 unionised workers at one of largest food service operators at Vancouver International Airport (YVR) voted in favour of a potential strike. Picket lines could go up after workers issue a 72-hour strike notice.

A key issue is workers' poverty-level wages. According to Unite Here Local 40, while the airport, the second largest in Canada, generates hundreds of millions per year in revenue (\$492 million in 2022), the average food service wage under the contract with SSP Canada Food Services is only \$18.27—well below Metro Vancouver's living wage of \$25.68.

In a survey of YVR food service workers conducted last month by the union, 89 percent are struggling to keep up with bills or housing costs, 92 percent of these workers have had to cut back on other expenses to get by each month including nearly 40 percent stating they are buying less fresh food, and 52 percent who are not able to support family members as they have previously.

In addition, workers are fighting for the reinstatement of their transit reimbursement program, which previously covered Uber and taxi rides for all food service employees who worked outside of public transit hours. As of February 1, workers have had to pay for their own transit costs after their late-night shift, which could start or end between 1 and 5 a.m.

According to statements released Wednesday by YVR officials, the potential strike could take place at one of the busiest times of the year with more than 1.1 million passengers expected to flow through the airport over spring break and the Easter weekend.

Union isolates struggle by Halifax port workers as strike enters fourth week

The strike by 239 striking autoworkers at the Autoport vehicle transit hub in Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia has entered its fourth week, as the union continues to restrict their struggle.

On February 27, members of Unifor Local 100 hit the picket lines after contract negotiations with Autoport, a major importer of luxury European cars situated in the Port of Halifax, reached a dead end. Earlier that week, workers, who are demanding real wages increases and better working conditions, overwhelmingly rejected a tentative agreement sanctioned by the union which offered a meagre 8 percent wage increase over three years, which is nowhere near the rate of inflation.

Since then, bargaining between the parties has not resumed. Canadian railway giant CN, which owns Autoport, has made clear it has no intention of meeting the autoworkers' key demands. Eight hours into the strike, it mobilised its "contingency plan" by employing scab labour to ensure port operations continued "uninterrupted."

Unifor is facilitating CN's clear intention of starving the workers out, staging scant and scattered "solidarity" rallies across the country and uttering hollow threats of "escalating action" until CN ceases its use of scab labour and returns to the bargaining table.

For years, Unifor, Canada's largest public sector union, has been making hollow appeals to the various levels of governments to pass anti-scab legislation prohibiting replacement workers in federal workplaces. The fraud of this campaign was clearly exposed by its celebration of the anti-worker legislation known as Bill 58 recently tabled by the NDP-backed pro-war and austerity Liberal government, and by the right-wing Conservatives. This would further curtail workers' ability to strike, but Unifor claimed this as a "significant victory for Canadian workers."

Ontario's public liquor store workers hold "Day of Action" to protest Tory-imposed wages cuts and privatisation

On Tuesday, March 12, 8,000 workers at the Ontario liquor board staged a "Day of Action" in 11 cities across the province, protesting over low wages and working conditions ahead of the next round of bargaining between the union representing them, OPSEU/SEFPO, and the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO).

The protests involved marches and distribution of petitions signed by nearly 7,000 LCBO employees opposing the imminent sell-off of the province's liquor retail and distribution currently owned by the hard-right Ontario Conservative government.

When the collective agreement expired last year, the LCBO offered workers an increase of just 0.75 percent for each year between 2021-2023. However, in late January, a provincial court overturned the province's 1 percent cap on their salary increases, and Ontario public service workers were granted a retroactive pay increase of 9.5 percent spread over the same period. Recently, the union praised arbitrator Gerry Lee for his role in securing the paltry deal, which resulted in wages well below the inflation rate during those years in question.

On average, an Ontario liquor store employee earns the province's minimum wage of only \$16.55 an hour, according to ZipRecruiter. The retroactive hike increases their pay to just \$18.00—still seven dollars less than the livable wage in the Greater Toronto Area (which is \$25.00 according to the Livable Wage Network).



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