

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, April 11, urban bus drivers in Buenos Aires carried out a 24-hour protest strike. The strike involved 80 percent of the city's bus lines. At issue is management's refusal to pay agreed-upon wage increases.

The transit bosses, represented by the Bus Transportation Chamber (AMBA), responded to the strike and rally by claiming that, due to the elimination of government subsidies and freezing of fares, the companies have lost 24 percent of income per passenger and will not be able to pay as had been agreed, until the Milei administration unfreezes fares and restores government subsidies.

Hundreds of steelworkers rallied across from Acindar, one of Argentina's largest producers of steel, in the city of Villa Constitucion, on April 11, as wage negotiations are getting under way. The workers are demanding wages tied to inflation plus a substantial wage increase ("we cannot continue living with this shit wage," declared a demonstrator). The steelworkers have not had any wage increases since November 2023, while inflation is rising at a double-digit monthly rate.

Another demonstrator indicated that a victory for Acindar steelworkers will have a national impact, beyond Villa Constitucion.

The wage demand pits steelworkers in direct confrontation with the Milei administration, whose officials have placed a ceiling on wage negotiations that prevents workers from recovering past losses and catching up with current inflation.

On April 9, family members and members of El Salvador's Government Victims Movement (MOVIR) marched in San Salvador denouncing the government's "state of siege," on the second anniversary of the group's formation. A MOVIR spokesperson denounced "two years of attacks on human rights, of militarization (including in the University of San Salvador), attacks on small businesses, and rural land-grabs."

Those arrested and disappeared two years ago are often held incommunicado from their families. It is suspected that many of them, if still alive, are being held under conditions of hunger and lack access to medical care.

United States

Journalists at two newspapers in New York and Texas owned by the media giant Gannett Company carried out strikes to demand living wages and job security. Reporters at the *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle* in Rochester, New York, launched an open-ended strike April 6 after contract negotiations stalled. The old agreement expired in 2019.

"I'll be out here until it happens until we get a fair contract," Tina MacIntyre-Yee, a *Democrat & Chronicle* reporter told WXXI News. "It's not like we're asking for the moon. We're asking for people who've been underpaid to be paid a living wage. I mean, some people who've been here for 30 years or more, have barely seen a raise. It's a sin, how much they're being paid."

Gary Craig, another reporter, who's been at the *Democrat & Chronicle* for 34 years, told Hell Gate, "The last 20 years, I've been seeing layoffs. The newsroom was a hundred plus early in my career, and now we're down to two dozen at most."

Meanwhile, journalists at the *Austin American-Statesman* in Austin, Texas, returned to work April 9 after a five-day strike with no resolution of the contract. Nicole Villalpando, who chairs the Newsguild local, called Gannett's wage proposal "laughable."

Gannett is offering an annual salary floor of \$50,000 and a one-time raise of 50 cents an hour for workers above the minimum starting wage. The Newsguild has been bargaining for a salary floor of \$57,000 and additional wage increases for senior reporters. The *Austin American-Statesman* has seen its staff reduced by 25 percent in the last three years. The Austin journalists are now considering an open-ended strike.

Hotel workers staged walkouts at three hotels in downtown Phoenix during the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Final Four basketball tournament. Workers at the Sheraton left their jobs April 6 and those at the Renaissance and Westin struck on April 9. All three hotels had been designated as "fan hotels" by the NCAA.

Underlying the walkouts was the foot-dragging by Marriott, the full owner of the Renaissance and Westin facilities, and the Sheraton, which is jointly owned by Marriott and Blackstone, one of the world's largest investment companies. The old agreements expired at the end of June 2023.

"Workers at this point are fed up and tired, and they are ready for a contract. They're ready to get their raises, and they're ready to get their health insurance and pensions," said Victoria Stahl, spokesperson for Unite Here Local 11, which represents the hotel workers.

Local 11 has also filed unfair labor practices against the Sheraton over the role of hotel management's use of interrogation and surveillance tactics along with the firing of two employees, Rahmat Ullah and Matt Piña.

Canada

On Thursday, April 11, roughly 2,000 graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) at Western University in London, Ontario began strike action after rejecting the latest offer from the employer.

Talks between the university and the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) Local 610 had been ongoing since the contract expired at the end of last August. The school has offered an hourly wage rate of \$48.16, retroactive to January 1 and an hourly wage of \$51.10 by the fourth year of the contract. Currently, the hourly pay for GTAs is \$47.22 per hour.

According to union statements, many GTAs, who also study full-time, are “living in poverty,” earning about \$1,000 per month when ancillary fees are taken off in a city where the rent for a one-bedroom is \$1,600 per month. A study conducted by a recent grad student indicated that 76 percent of her colleagues face housing challenges, 44 percent identify as food insecure, and 55 percent couldn’t afford clothing or basic hygiene products.

Western University has made clear it has no intention of meeting the GTA’s wage demands and has announced plans to “minimise” any impact on students and colleagues across campus. A recent post on the Reddit forum authored by a student who attended a recent town hall meeting warned that the School of Nursing is threatening to hire scabs to break the strike.

The strike by GTAs at Western is part of the recent wave of struggles for higher wages and improved working conditions by university faculty and staff across the region who are being kept isolated and divided by their unions.

This includes the seven-week-long strike by 3,000 teaching staff at York University in Toronto which the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903 refuses to broaden throughout its vast membership across Canadian universities, let alone to the GTAs at Western represented by PSAC. On Sunday, the union announced its endorsement of a new tentative agreement which it admitted contains wage gains “well below ... what we were seeking” but “the best we could get under the circumstances.” The strike will continue until a ratification vote takes place this week.

Eight thousand University of Toronto educators and service workers also represented by CUPE were ready to walk off the job at the same time as York University workers until the union swiftly pushed through a sellout agreement to shut it down.

In Montreal, the strike by 1,600 teaching assistants at McGill University, which began on March 25, has been capped by the union at eight weeks, allowing time for the Association of Graduate Students Employed at McGill (AGSEM) to exhaust and starve out workers—who are given a meagre \$350 per week in strike pay—and ram through a sellout contract.

On Friday, workers in long-term care set up 37 “information” pickets across Ontario in protest of the appalling conditions in for-profit nursing homes while the corporations managing them raked in billions. Their primary employer is Exendicare, Ontario’s largest for-profit nursing home organisation, which generated \$1.3 billion in revenues in 2023.

The protesting nurses, personal support workers, and guest attendants are part of the 3,000 members of the Ontario Nurses’ Association (ONA) who are fighting for better staffing ratios to improve resident care and meaningful wage increases. The rallies took place ahead of the ONA’s “in person” negotiations with corporate management scheduled throughout this week and again on April 30.

The ONA has already thrown in the towel on the struggle by preemptively agreeing to the mediation of any outstanding issues, and failing that, proceeding to the rigged pro-employer arbitration process.

This is effectively a rerun of the bankrupt strategy it employed last May during the contract struggle by public sector nurses. Following three years subject to a wage restraint law imposed by the province’s hard-right Conservative government, which capped increases at 1 percent a year, union officials bowed to provincial regulations that prohibit strike action and accepted arbitration, which granted below-inflation raises of just 11 percent over two years.

The Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation (STF) has shut down the months-long province-wide series of limited strikes and other job actions by 13,000 teachers, submitting to the province’s pro-austerity hard-right Conservative government and its concessions demands.

Less than two weeks after rejecting the Ministry of Education’s latest

offer, the STF announced that strike action would cease and teachers would stand down on Friday, April 12 at midnight and bargaining would resume on Tuesday.

Teachers across the province had been engaged in limited job action, such as one-day protests and work-to-rule sanctions, since their contract expired in mid-January.

The union’s claim that a new mandate from the province “properly address all of the issues important to teachers” and “sufficient progress” has been made is an absurd and cynical lie. Throughout the strike, the province has made clear that the new contract will not address the teachers’ key demands that the critical issues of classroom size and complexity be addressed. Its latest maneuver, in the form of a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding presented to the STF on March 28, reiterated this long-held position.

After months of stalled contract talks, the union representing assembly workers at a Quebec Airbus assembly plant announced on Friday it has reached a tentative deal with the employer, delaying the planned strike by its membership.

On Friday, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), which represents 1,300 out of 3,000 workers at Airbus’ Mirabel plant in Montreal, announced it reached an Agreement In Principle (AIP) with Airbus. Members including mechanics, toolmakers, welders and technicians, are scheduled to vote on the proposed terms on April 21. If approved, the AIP is not legally binding.

The workers, who assemble the single-aisle A220 for Airbus, had rejected two previous offers from the employer since their five-year contract expired on December 31. The latest three-year contract offer, rejected by workers in mid-March, which contained derisory salary increases well below the rate of inflation in addition to cuts to insurance coverage and pensions, was described as “totally unacceptable” by the IAM, and workers voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action.

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.

Workers who prepare meals for in-flight service for multiple airlines at Toronto Pearson International Airport are prepared to strike as early as April 16 over poverty wages and lack of benefits and safety.

Teamsters Local Union 647, which represents more than 800 workers with airline catering company Gate Gourmet, has assured the hard-right Ontario government and airport management that it is “committed to reaching a new labour agreement as soon as possible and without any disruption.” In other words, the union is committed to forcing through a sellout agreement before the strike occurs.

The union will be entering two days of mediation with the employer and provincial government on Thursday and Friday to cook up a deal, and if the talks are unsuccessful, staff will strike as early as Tuesday.

On Wednesday, Canada’s second largest airliner, WestJet, announced that it has “proactively prepared” contingency plans to mitigate disruptions to its operations in the event of a strike. Air Canada has yet to make a comment, confident that a strike will be avoided.

Some 1,500 healthcare workers in Alberta represented by the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) have entered into contract negotiations with private long-term care company Covenant Health. Workers include health care aides, rehabilitation care workers, nursing attendants, mental health aides, recreation aides, assisted living aides, and home support aides. The next round of bargaining has been scheduled for April 11 and 12.

The employer is offering an insulting 7.5 percent over the next four years. In the previous four-year contract, which expired last month, workers received a combined 4.25 percent over the term of the collective agreement while provincial inflation over the same period ballooned by 13.92 percent, an effective wage decrease of 9.67 percent.

Healthcare workers are demanding a two-year contract and wage increases of 25 percent this year and 10 percent next year to protect against future inflation and compensate for six years of provincially imposed wage freezes and wage suppression, conditions which AUPE refused to mobilise its 95,000-strong membership to oppose.

In 2021, when the pro-employer labour relations board on behalf of the Alberta Health Services criminalised the province-wide wildcat strike by overworked and underpaid healthcare staff, AUPE immediately set about policing the anti-democratic ruling and commanded workers to return to their jobs the very next day, citing the threat of criminal prosecution.



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