

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

Members of the Government Workers' Association (ATE) blocked the Andean Bariloche Ski Resort Airport in the Patagonian Province of Rio Negro on April 18, declaring President Javier Milei unwelcome (*persona non-grata*) in response to the president's closed-door meeting with a group of the country's wealthiest oligarchs.

Hundreds of demonstrators defied government federal security forces, rejecting the government austerity and repressive measures against government workers and the rest of the working class.

Milei's meeting with Argentina's top CEOs took place in Bariloche's exclusive Llao Llao Conference, a yearly "discreet" meeting of top executives, closed to the press. In his speech to the financial, industrial, mineral, and agricultural oligarchs, Milei is said to have praised dollar-laundering/dollar flight tactics practiced by these corporate vultures.

So far, Milei's austerity has left tens of thousands of government workers without employment, while destroying the buying power of those that are still employed, and of government retirees. Currently, over 23 million Argentines live in poverty.

Victoriano Lorenzo, a coalition representing 22 homeless communities in Panama, led a march through downtown Panama City and a rally at the headquarters of the Housing Ministry in that city, on Tuesday April 16. Over 1 million Panamanians lack a roof over their heads, following decades of government inaction.

Hundreds marched chanting "housing is a right, not a business!" "Down with neo-liberalism!" "down with corruption!" In addition to demanding housing as a human right, the protesters also demanded that they be given property rights over land they currently occupy, running potable water and electricity.

Members of Uruguay's Government Workers Federation (COFE) carried out a 24-hour protest strike against attacks on absenteeism and health benefits being implemented by the Luis Lacalle Pou administration. One of the changes that upsets workers the most is a reduction in sick pay to 75 percent of wages, (currently 100 percent), after the 10th day of sickness.

High School teachers also walked out in solidarity with the COFE members as did employees of the Children's Institute of Uruguay. Public health services only took place in cases of emergency.

Workers at the University of Sonora went on strike on April 15 after management countered workers' demand for a 10 percent increase in salary and 5 percent in benefits with a salary offer of 4 percent and 2 percent in benefits (both below the rate of inflation).

The strikers include administrative employees, gardeners, cleaners, kitchen personnel and maintenance workers. Management claims that there is no money for more raises and argues that these employees are paid more than similar workers in Sonora State.

The 40,000-student Sonora University system includes campuses in Hermosillo, Obregon City, Navojoa, Caborca, Santa Ana and Nogales. It employs 2,500 instructors and 2,600 striking workers.

Students joined the picket lines, declaring that "learning cannot take place under conditions involving contingent workers."

Academic workers have postponed their own strike for 15 days while negotiations continue.

United States

The 230 workers at the Gradall Industries excavator plant in New Philadelphia, Ohio, walked out on strike April 15 to demand better pay and healthcare benefits. Members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local 1285 charge that the miserly 6 percent wage offer by the company is entirely obliterated by the company's transfer of healthcare costs to workers.

Workers went on strike for a month back in 2018 over the same issues. According to the IAM, that contract was settled for an 8.25 percent wage increase over three years along with an increase in pensions, while healthcare costs were frozen.

Gradall Industries, which manufactures state-of-the-art excavators, was purchased by the Alamo Group in 2006. Alamo, which operates some 26 plants in the United States, finished its 2023 year with net sales of \$1.7 billion, a 12 percent increase over the previous year, with net earnings of \$136.2 million, up 34 percent over the previous year.

Thousands of flight attendants for United Airlines picketed at airports across the country April 11 chanting, "Overworked, underpaid—pay us a living wage." Members of the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) have been in negotiations for over two years and are currently at odds with United over pay, benefits and scheduling.

United executives received double-digit compensation increases in 2023. United's Scott Kirby is the highest paid airline CEO in the industry, registering a 90 percent increase in his compensation. Meanwhile, United's recent fourth-quarter financial results for 2023 racked up operating revenues of \$13.6 billion, a 9.9 percent increase over 2023.

Some 120 nurses at the MyMichigan Health hospital in Sault Saint Marie, Michigan, launched a five-day strike April 15 after negotiations failed to provide a competitive contract in terms of wages and benefits. Members of the Michigan Nurses Association are protesting the fact that they make \$10 an hour less than other nurses at hospitals in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

According to the union, the failure of management to provide comparable compensation has led to a staffing shortage that exacerbates nurses' working conditions. Recently, MyMichigan spent \$10 million on a new computer system and invested millions in the purchase of three other Upper Peninsula hospitals. The old contract agreement expired back on December 31, 2023.

Canada

On Thursday, the union representing 1,600 teaching assistants (TAs) at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, shut down the near month-long strike by its membership. A press release issued Friday morning by the Association of Graduate Students Employed at McGill (AGSEM), announced that an “agreement in principle” on a new four-year contract proposed by the university was approved by 75 percent of participating workers.

McGill TAs have been fighting for job security and meaningful wage increases. However, the contract even in its vague and non-binding form does nothing to address the TAs’ core strike demands. The new terms include minimal wage increases of 15.5 percent over four years, expiring in 2027. Although the hourly wage for teaching assistants will rise progressively from its current rate of \$33.03 to \$38.46, the raise won’t take effect for over two years—beginning on August 1, 2026. Even the top rate is still far below the wages TAs are fighting for—around \$46 per hour—which is comparable to the wages their counterparts receive in other schools in the region.

Nor does the new agreement’s “guarantees of transparency in the allocation of teaching assistant budgets” ameliorate the critical issue of job security. McGill has announced that it will continue pressing forward with its planned cuts to the number of contract hours included in the TA contracts. The current allocation of 180 hours per semester (four months) per TA—just 12 hours per week on average—will be further reduced, limiting TAs’ compensation, which is already far below the cost of living in Montreal, and compromising their ability to provide quality education to their students.

Leading up to the strike, the AGSEM dragged out talks with university management, which had already made clear its intent on imposing concessions, before issuing a strike vote to the membership.

When workers hit the picket line on March 25, the AGSEM limited their strike to eight weeks to ensure its speedy resolution, deliberately isolating the TAs from their striking counterparts at York University in Toronto, whose strike began a month earlier, and at Western University in London whose strike began on April 11. Emboldened by the union’s restrictions, university management responded by stepping up its bullying of faculty into assuming responsibility for the striking TAs’ tasks and boosting university security to intimidate the picketing workers.

More than 10,000 transit workers at Toronto’s public transport agency could be on strike by the end of the month, determined to gain real improvements in job security, wages and benefits.

The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 113, which represents some 10,000 transit workers at Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), is working studiously to avoid a strike. On Monday, the union applied to the Ontario Ministry of Labour to request that a conciliator be appointed after weeks of negotiations with the employer reached an impasse, making clear that this was only “an initial step” toward labour action and that bargaining would continue. A firm strike date has not yet been set.

Another 661 electrical, trade, and signal workers at the TTC represented by CUPE Local 2, who have been without a contract for two years, had prepared to strike on Monday. However, that morning, the union announced that after a weekend of “intense negotiations,” a tentative agreement was reached with the TTC. That contract has yet to be ratified by the membership.

The Toronto transit workers struggle is being preemptively isolated to ensure minimal disruptions to transit services. In a letter to its membership, the ATU warned its membership that in the event of a strike by their electrical worker colleagues, ATU members are not permitted to join their strike during work hours or refuse to cross their picket lines.

It has been 13 years since unionised TTC workers have been in a

position to take job action. Workers are now legally able to strike after a court ruling last year struck down Ontario’s designation of the TTC as an essential service.

On Tuesday, more than 800 workers who prepare food for the country’s major airlines walked off the job, demanding safety improvements and a livable wage. The strike went into effect one minute past midnight on Tuesday, after the food service workers voted to reject an insulting final offer from global food and hospitality company Gate Gourmet.

Earlier in the month, the catering workers represented by Teamsters Canada, voted 99 percent in favour of strike action after being presented with the employer’s “final deal”—a pathetic 12 percent pay raise over three years. Catering workers currently make between \$17.69 and \$25.10 per hour. According to the OLWN, the livable wage in the Greater Toronto Area is \$25.05.

On Friday, Teamsters presented a new proposal with targeted wage increases of \$2 to \$3 hourly raises for certain job categories, which Gate Gourmet has outright rejected, threatening workers of job losses that it claims a prolonged strike would incur.

Ontario’s hard-right Conservative government is scrambling to promptly shut down the strike, appointing pro-employer mediators to impose a rapid pro-employer settlement. The country’s largest airline, Air Canada, has announced that it has mobilised a contingency plan to minimise disruptions caused by the strike.

The union representing 10,000 educators across Nova Scotia has entered into a non-binding “agreement in principle” with the province’s Progressive Conservative Party government, delaying a planned strike.

According to the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU), the contents of the proposal will be made available to the membership in the coming days. Statements from NSTU president Ryan Lutes indicate the deal is a sellout. “Is it, in an instant, going to fix every issue in schools? Absolutely not,” he told the media. “But we think that there’s significant gains,” he added.

Teachers have been working without a contract since August 1, 2023 and negotiations have been underway since June. On April 11, 98 percent voted in favour of strike action, citing issues around salaries and classroom conditions. The union filed for conciliation in February, and the two sides met with the conciliator this week which resulted in the new agreement.

On Monday, April 15, Unifor Local 597 which represents 1,200 workers at Loblaw-owned Dominion stores in Newfoundland and Labrador endorsed a tentative agreement with the notoriously ruthless grocery giant.

Although details of the agreement will not be made public until a ratification vote by the membership takes place, the new contract is unlikely to address the ongoing issues of low pay and precarious employment endemic to the retail food sector.

In 2020, when Dominion workers held a 12-week-long strike at 11 stores across the province, Unifor rammed through a rotten deal containing pathetic pay increases starting at a minuscule 35 cents an hour, the assurance of just 22 new full-time jobs, and a pathetic signing bonus—a PC gift card valued between \$50 and \$500, depending on the employee’s status and years worked for the company.

In 2023, amid the soaring cost of living debilitating working families, the net earnings of Loblaw Companies Limited soared to around \$2.19 billion dollars. The previous year, CEO Galen Weston’s compensation jumped 55 percent to \$8.4 million.



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