

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 April 29 oil processing workers will begin a strike of indefinite duration. The strikers reject the Milei administration's "labor reform" being discussed in the federal congress this week. The proposed legislation, in addition to limiting wage increases, would impose a new, brutal, tax on wages.

The strike affects 80 percent of the oil processing plants in the country, many of them located in the vicinity of ports (vegetable oils are a major export in Argentina).

The leader of the oil workers union has asked that management "lobby" congress, to prevent the labor reform from taking place.

Joining the oil workers in their strike are government employees of the National Food Safety and Quality Service (SENASA), whose strike will suspend agricultural exports over a period of 72 hours.

On Friday, temporary (non-contract) Sao Paulo teachers carried out a strike, mobilizing at every school in the city. At issue is the privatization of education by the provincial government of Tarcisio de Freitas, as part of widespread policies of privatization in education and other state services. The governor had targeted contingent teachers in public education.

In addition to facing layoffs, many of the educators are owed back wages. Recently the de Freitas administration announced its intention to replace teachers with Artificial Intelligence "platforms", such as Chat GPT, paving the way for more layoffs.

Last Thursday 2,000 striking dock workers and their families from the ports of Lirquen, Talcahuano, and San Vicente in central Chile demonstrated in support of their comrades in Puerto Coronel against company threats to abolish their permanent jobs and replace them with a contingent work force. The new company policies aim to abolish existing mandates of working hours and working conditions. These policies have already been imposed at other ports, leading to an ongoing struggle by dockworkers in Bio Bio and Valparaiso.

The marchers appealed to local government officials that they stop the ports from imposing their new rules, despite evidence that the government is collaborating with port management. Puerto Coronel is suing the Bio Bio dockworkers union for financial losses due to the strikes and protests.

Puerto Coronel workers have carried out protest strikes since the beginning of April.

On Wednesday April 24, residents of the Alajuelita region, in north-central Costa Rica, marched on Congress demanding a solution to the extreme water inequality that affects the Central American nation, and their region in particular, in the context of the current climate crisis and the privatization of water by the Rodrigo Chavez administration.

While wealthy residents of San Jose have plenty of water, even for golf courses, farmers and residents of smaller cities describe having to get up

at dawn to store water, while there is pressure in the pipes. Protesters also denounced the fact that years of privatization have guaranteed water supplies to multinationals, such as Coca Cola and Del Monte, while fields are dry and unable to grow anything, exacerbating poverty among farmers and peasants.

Protesters are demanding that the right to water be enshrined in the constitution for all residents of Costa Rica.

On Friday, April 26 striking high school teachers in Zacatecas state (central Mexico) occupied the state government house, demanding higher wages.

The educators, on strike for two weeks, initially shut down 20 out of 30 high schools across the state, most of which are still closed. Striking teachers asked their union, the SNTE to negotiate with the state, but have been ignored.

On Friday the SNTE leaders sided with the Zacatecas administration and demanded that the strikers cease the occupation. A spokesperson for the strikers indicated that their wage demands are longstanding and that neither their union, nor school authorities have acted on them.

Joining the striking teachers are other school workers who have their own wage demands.

United States

The one-week strike by 500 healthcare technicians at Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center, Spokane, Washington, comes to an end on April 30. Members of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) 3000 took to the picket line April 22 to demand safe staffing ratios along with wages and benefits comparable to other regional hospitals.

"We are chronically short-staffed—have been for years," respiratory therapist Sydney Charlton, told the *Spokesman-Review*. Another respiratory therapist, Michelle Schultz gave birth to her daughter during the pandemic. She said, "This strike represents the time I lost because of mandatory overtime during COVID, when all I wanted was to be home with her. But we weren't allowed to leave our 12-hour shift without getting sent to HR for patient abandonment while receiving no hazard pay."

Local 3000 members voted down management's last offer on April 12. After the union gave its 10-day strike notice, no bargaining has taken place. Negotiations began back in November of 2023.

On April 18, a Seattle, Washington, court case concluded Providence Health & Services, the Catholic healthcare system that operates the struck Spokane hospital along with another 50 hospitals in seven states, had illegally underpaid 33,000 of its Washington state workers. The ruling will likely require Providence to pay out more than \$200 million for the violation.

In February the hospital system agreed to forgive or repay some \$158 million in medical bills to nearly 100,000 poor patients who qualified for free or reduced-cost care. The office of the Washington attorney general filed suit two years ago and charged, "Providence trained staff to

aggressively ask for payment from patients who were likely eligible for financial assistance, or simply billed them without determining if they qualified.”

Some 1,000 electricians in the region of Seattle, Washington, have been on strike over wages since April 11 against an employer group represented by the Puget Sound Chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA). Members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 46 are demanding a wage increase of \$17.75 an hour over a three-year contract, as opposed to NECA’s offer of \$10 an hour.

Workers are also seeking paid holidays, safety provisions and a balanced work-life. Due to the high cost of living in the region, they are forced to commute for hours to work sites on top of putting in eight to ten-hour workdays.

The workers, who maintain the electrical infrastructure including security systems, badge readers, fire alarms and emergency response systems, have shut down multiple work sites including buildings leased by Amazon.

Negotiations commenced in January and workers say the strike will continue until a contract is ratified.

Canada

Workers across the country’s largest railways, CPKC and CN, could be on strike later next month. The strike vote by over 9,300 rail workers represented by Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) began on April 8 and will conclude on May 1. In the event of a majority “yes” vote, the earliest a strike could begin is May 22.

The negotiations and strike vote centre on three collective bargaining contracts that expired together in December 2023. Workers are demanding rest rights, work-life balance as well as seeking significant wage increases. According to TCRC, little progress has been made since April.

On March 1, the TCRC and the rail employers agreed to the appointment of federal conciliators, the preferred mechanism used countless times in the past to impose a pro-employer contract onto the workers that ignored their key demands for health and safety improvements.

The decades-long string of federally-mediated concessions contracts, which has upheld the criminal profits-before-lives policy of the railways, has created ever more treacherous safety conditions for workers and the general public. The most recent incident occurred on April 21, when a freight train rolled through London, Ontario hauling a string of burning rail cars that endangered railroaders, residents, and firefighters.

The month-long strike by 400 service workers at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto has been shut down by the union with the imposition of a new sellout contract which continues to undermine their working conditions.

On Friday, the OPSEU/SEFPO Local 535 announced that its striking workers, who include archivists, assistant curators, art handlers, food and beverages staff and technicians, voted 85 percent in favour of the tentative agreement between the union and the AGO. The contract was voted on by 281 members out of over 400.

The new three-year agreement, which expires just under a year and a half from now on November 30, 2025, ignores workers’ key strike demands, which included meaningful cost-of-living wage increases and protections against contracting out for part-time workers.

The new contract contains a paltry 11.4 percent wage increase for full-time and part-time workers, including a one percent wage reopener retroactive to December 1, 2021. In other words, the workers living in

Canada’s most expensive city in a period of record inflation are getting a mere 3.8 percent increase per year.

The part-time workers who already make up 60 percent of the museum’s staff, earn just \$34,380 annually on average. The minimal pay bump will only raise their pay to just over \$38,000, still well below the annual livable wage threshold in the Toronto area of \$45,591. Moreover, the agreement to the establishment of a “joint committee” aimed at reducing third-party contracting out of part-time labor is an insulting token gesture which allows the top AGO executives who generously pay themselves over \$200,000 a year to continue with their labour cuts through outsourcing.

During the ten months of talks with the openly hostile AGO, the union did nothing to aid the striking workers. It repeatedly begged management to bring a new offer to the table and appealed to community members to email AGO Foundation CEO Stephan Jost—who makes \$406,000—to demand a “fair deal” for workers.

Members of the Writers Guild of Canada (WGC) have voted “overwhelmingly” in favor of authorising strike action if no agreement is reached in its ongoing negotiations with the Canadian Media Producers Association (CMPA).

On April 25, the WGC announced that during the preceding week-long voting period 96.5 percent of its members voted in favor of job action, which marked the highest voter turnout in the Guild’s history at 70.2 percent of eligible voters and the first strike authorization vote in the Guild’s 33-year history.

WGC workers have been working without a new contract since December 31, 2023. The vote took place when nearly six months of negotiations aimed at renewing the Independent Production Agreement (IPA) between the WGC and the CMPA reached a stalemate.

Writers are fighting to secure fair compensation, protections against evolving artificial intelligence technologies on live action and animation projects and minimum writers’ room staffing on domestic TV series. Last year, the Guild revealed that during the past five years, the aggregate earnings of its Canadian citizen members have declined by nearly 22 percent when adjusted for inflation.

According to the WGC, it has not yet been able to negotiate “meaningful protections” for both live action and animation writers against AI, “reasonable compensation” for animation writers or secure minimum participation of screenwriters during production of television series. The CMPA does not represent the streaming platforms and Canadian networks so residuals are not in the contract.

The WGC appears to be delaying taking action. Despite its members’ clear readiness to strike and win meaningful improvements, the WGC says it “remains committed” to reaching a fair agreement with producers and keeping the industry working. It has not called a strike or set a date for job action yet.

Last year, the Hollywood writers’ strike was shut down by the WGC’s sister organisations in the U.S., the Writers Guild of America, which rammed through concessions contracts at the behest of the film studios which further devastated writers’ ability to work and make a living.

The union for 2,000 impoverished graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) at Western University is withholding details of a reported tentative agreement in a strike that began nearly two weeks ago. On Thursday, Western University announced it had reached a tentative agreement with Local 610 of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, the union representing the graduate teaching assistants.

The GTAs’ strike will continue pending the outcome of the ratification which must be agreed to by PSAC 610 members and Western’s board of governors.

Teaching assistants began their strike on April 11 demanding cost-of-living pay raises and a housing subsidy, citing the escalation of rents in London. According to union statements, many GTAs, who are limited to

working just 10 hours a week by the university, are “living in poverty,” earning only about \$1,000 per month.

There is little doubt that the reported tentative agreement will fall below the GTAs’ needs. Throughout the contract dispute, Western University has made clear that it has no intention of meeting their wage demands and had announced plans to “minimise” any impact on campus, including bullying faculty members into taking on work normally done by GTAs, increasing campus security, and threats by the School of Nursing to hire scab labor to break the strike.

On April 24 law professors at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec began an unlimited strike, the first for a faculty at McGill. The strike follows more than 18 months of negotiations between the university and the Association of McGill Professors of Law (AMPL), which represents tenured and tenure-track professors from McGill's Faculty of Law.

According to the AMPL, the professors are demanding better pay, as their salaries have lagged behind similar institutions like the University of Toronto, but McGill management is unwilling to engage in “meaningful collective bargaining.”

In mid-February, the AMPL held a one-day strike to pressure McGill to return to the bargaining table and negotiate their new three-year collective agreement in good faith. The collective agreement has been under negotiation for more than a year.

In their letter to law students, the association stressed that critical aspects of the collective agreement are still being negotiated. Unresolved articles include both monetary proposals, such as salary and employee benefits, and working conditions, including promotions, tenure appointments, and sabbatical leaves.

The university’s hostile attitude toward the striking faculty was revealed on the day the strike began, when it locked members of the Faculty of Law out of their email and online services without justification or prior notification.

In mid-April, McGill management displayed its bitter hostility to the strike then being carried out by 1,600 teaching assistants over job security and meaningful wage increases by stepping up its bullying of faculty into assuming responsibility for the striking TAs’ tasks and boosting university security to intimidate the picketing workers. The intimidation by McGill and isolation by the AGSEM finally succeeded in shutting down the strike after one month, forcing through a concessions contract that met none of the workers’ key demands.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact