

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

## Port of Montreal dockers adopt overtime ban amid ongoing contract talks

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

### Mass protests across Argentina over education cuts

Following the Senate approval, on October 9, of President Javier Milei's veto on increases in the education budget, previously slashed by his government, students and education workers took to the streets in every province, including the occupation of schools and universities.

Mass protests and rallies took place two days before the Senate vote, in an failed attempt to pressure legislators to oppose Milei's veto. Argentina has one of the world's highest inflation rates, close to 240 percent, and more than half of its population is living in poverty.

### Protest over the high living costs and social inequality in Martinique

Since October 7, thousands of workers and youth have marched and rallied in the impoverished Caribbean island of Martinique, a French possession, protesting the high cost of living and social inequality. Martinique is the poorest French territory, with consumer prices higher than those in Paris.

Protesters demanded an end to Martinique's colonial status and opposed the lack of economic growth, high unemployment, food and water insecurity, and the seizure of peasant lands.

Last Wednesday, protesters faced police repression following the burning of a police station. A demonstrator was killed. Government authorities so far insist that the perpetrator was not a police officer.

The following day demonstrators marched on runways of the airport, forcing the cancelation of flights. Protests continued on Friday, October 11, with police arresting eight demonstrators.

### Maine paper mill workers rally to protest forced overtime

Workers at the Sappi North America paper mill in Skowhegan, Maine, held a rally October 8 to protest excessive mandatory overtime that could lead to "fatal mistakes." The 480 mill workers, members of United Steelworkers Local 4-9, voted to authorize a strike in September after their previous three-year contract expired in August.

The plant operates on a 24/7 schedule and workers are forced to work up to 13 days straight. Due to retirements and the company's refusal to properly staff the plant, workers can be mandated to work 24-hour shifts to maintain production.

Sappi management is also seeking to shift additional healthcare costs onto the backs of workers as well as alter contract language governing earned time off.

Initially, workers were to have gone on strike on October 8, but USW officials called off the walkout and substituted a rally. Negotiations will resume October 17. Sappi North America is based in Boston and employs some 2,100 workers at plants in the United States and Canada.

### Massachusetts teachers launch work-to-rule over stalled contract talks

Teachers at a number of North Shore, Massachusetts, schools began a work-to-rule campaign October 7 to protest stalled negotiations and demand parity with nearby school districts. Educators at Beverly, Revere, and Gloucester held an initial protest at schools on October 3 to announce the work-to-rule tactic while Marblehead educators launched their protest on October 2.

The work-to-rule policy got the backing of 99 percent of the teachers. Educators will only perform contractually required tasks while not working after-school activities such as chaperoning field trips, writing newsletters and serving on school committees. The work-to-rule action will be rotated on a daily basis between schools.

Among the disputed issues are staffing, class sizes, parental leave and investment in students. North Shore Educators United,

the union representing teachers, is asking for raises between 38 and 55 percent while school management has put forward increases between 15 and 25 percent.

Beth Parkhurst, a fifth-grade teacher at West Parish Elementary and union representative, told WBZ NewsRadio, “Most teachers work between a 40, 45-hour week, maybe 50-hour week. They don’t get their prep time, so they have to come early and stay late after school in order to get their paper work done, get their lessons done...”

### **Port of Montreal dockers adopt overtime ban amid ongoing contract talks**

Approximately 1,150 longshoremen at the Port of Montreal began an indefinite overtime ban October 10 as the organization representing shipping companies continues to refuse to accede to their contract demands. The dockworkers, who launched a three-day strike last month, are calling for improved scheduling, an end to the undermining of seniority rights and contracting out, and other improvements to working conditions.

“We’re ready to negotiate intensively, but since the employer is dragging his feet, we’re putting a little pressure on him to devote his energies to finding a solution,” said Canadian Union of Public Employees Local spokesman Michel Murray. In fact, the union has repeatedly blocked the militant workers from launching an all-out strike, including by limiting last month’s work stoppage in advance to three days. CUPE has now agreed to bargaining under the leadership of a government-appointed mediator, i.e., an official appointed by the same Liberal government that helped the bosses enforce the backbreaking conditions dockers work under by banning the 2021 Montreal dockworkers’ strike.

The opposition of the CUPE leadership to waging a genuine struggle for dockers’ demands and expanding the fight to other sections of the working class confronting similar conditions has allowed the port employers to go on the offensive. The Maritime Employees Association, the bargaining agent for shipping companies, announced in response to the overtime ban that it would not pay workers on incomplete crews that delay shipping. This is a massive provocation that effectively grants management arbitrary powers to determine who is paid by using all manner of scheduling tricks.

Danish shipping giant Maersk backed up the employers’ assault, announcing it would add a \$2,000 surcharge to every container bound for Canada. Freight companies are already stating that many goods will be diverted to Vancouver or Halifax, allowing the shipping giants to evade any real harm from CUPE’s token overtime ban. The globally coordinated attacks on dockers by the profit-hungry shipping giants demonstrates that Port of Montreal dockers require an internationalist and socialist perspective.

### **across Edmonton’s schools**

More than 4,000 education assistants, librarians, and custodians are voting on strike action this week in Edmonton, the capital of Alberta. The workers, who on average earn the poverty-level wage of \$26,000 per year, are demanding their first pay raise in five years and have been working without a collective agreement since August 2020. Local statistics suggest that a living wage for the city is \$45,000 per year.

CUPE Alberta president Rory Gill said that there would be “no safe way” to open schools if the strike goes ahead. This fact raises the opportunity for education support workers to appeal to their teacher colleagues to broaden the struggle for improved pay and conditions. Gill explained that most workers have a second job to make ends meet, with some even having a third or fourth job.

If a strike takes place, it will pit the low-paid workers in a direct conflict with the far-right United Conservative Party government led by Premier Danielle Smith. Last month, Smith’s government intervened to ban a strike by education support workers in Fort McMurray. With 1,065 education assistants, librarians, administrative workers, and custodians set to strike September 17, Smith’s government announced September 16 the establishment of a Dispute Inquiry Board, which bans strike action for 30 days while the government appointees work out a settlement.

Predictably, the Canadian Union of Public Employees has made clear in advance that it would not defy a government back-to-work order in Edmonton, stating merely that it would possibly launch legal action. Such challenges, which have become the union bureaucracy’s standard response to the innumerable back-to-work orders imposed over recent years by Canadian governments at all levels, invariably take years to meander through the courts. In the end, even if the workers are found to be in the right, these challenges never result in overturning the concessions imposed by the employers with the government’s strikebreaking assistance.

The union must give a 72-hour notice for strike action once the vote in favour by the workers in Edmonton is announced. A strike could therefore take place as soon as next week.



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### **Over 4,000 education support workers vote on strike action**