

Workers Struggles: The Americas

Protests took place in Panama last week over pension privatization plans while CUPE continues to block job actions despite overwhelming strike votes by Alberta school support staff

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

Workers protest Panama pension privatization plan

On February 12, a series of protests took place in Panama City against proposed legislation that would privatize social security pensions. In addition, the new law would increase the age of retirement and replace the current system with individual accounts. Protesters denounced the proposed law as the “robbery of the century,” insisting that those benefiting the most would be banks and private pension funds.

The protests also denounced government corruption that has resulted in the looting of social security funds as well as revenue generated by the Panama Canal.

In one of the demonstrations, construction workers were attacked by “anti-riot” police in Balboa Avenue in downtown Panama City. The police used tear gas and workers responded with stones.

Picketing also took place across from the National Legislature.

Argentine farmworkers stage protest strike at Granja Tres Arroyos chicken farm

On February 13 and 14, farmworkers surrounded the “La China” plant, part of the Granja Tres Arroyos chicken farm. The workers are demanding to be paid back wages and are protesting the company’s shutdown and plans to lay off 400 workers as part of a strategy to lower labor costs.

The plant is located in the northeastern province of Entre Rios.

The protest comes after months of pay cuts, and layoffs by the company. The workers responded with strikes, repeatedly suspended by their union, and slowdowns. Workers and their families have set up protest tents around the plant.

Workers at a sister plant, Beccar, also part of the Tres Arroyos complex, are also participating in the protests and refusing speed-ups imposed by the company to make up for the La China conflict.

Peasant protest in department of La Guajira, Colombia

Since February 11, peasant organizations in the department of La Guajira, in northern Colombia (along the border with Venezuela) have been marching and rallying over the government’s indifference to the regions’ critical problems. Security, water and land reform are the biggest issues.

The peasants are demanding a full land reform, the distribution of water, improved roads, and an end to the coal and copper mining in the region, more funds for education, health and child nutrition

Despite the availability of water resources in the El Cercado Dam [198 million cubic meters], its use is reserved for the wealthy, while peasants, poor workers, and Indian communities go without. Gang violence targets peasant and Indian leaders.

Throughout the week, peasants blocked major roads in the region, disrupting commerce and tourist traffic.

Eleiner Gomez, one of the participants in the marches and rallies declared to the Telesur Press Agency: “Our communities need many things, our population centers, towns and villages, we lack water and the roads are in bad shape.”

Former guerrilla fighter Benedicto Gonzalez, interviewed by Caracol Radio Station, demanded that the government carry out full land reform, expropriating latifundia and distributing land among the peasantry, something that has been promised by Colombian governments for many years but never carried out.

Eastern Pennsylvania nurses strike

Some 800 registered nurses at three Geisinger Health System medical centers in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania walked out Monday morning, beginning a five-day strike to demand a new contract that includes improved pay and medical coverage, and safe staffing levels.

The strike by members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Pennsylvania has hit Geisinger Wyoming Valley Medical Center in Plains Township, Geisinger South Wilkes-Barre and Geisinger Healthplex CenterPoint in Pittston.

Carrying signs reading “Corporate greed overlooks patient needs” and “United for our patients,” nurses told the *Citizens Voice* that there are 300 unfilled positions in the medical centers and that management is taking away benefits such as sick time and accrued time off. “This is the first time I’ve seen benefits taken away at this amount,” Lucy Rettke, a registered nurse for 30 years, told the local news outlet. “It’s ridiculous. It’s sad for new nurses coming on.” She added, “We’ve been working our guts out, especially since COVID, where people just walked out each

day. I care about my patients and they need nurses. They need to get their stuff together.”

The walkout in eastern Pennsylvania takes place as nearly 5,000 nurses and physicians continue their strike in Oregon.

Boston Public Library bars workers from donating sick time to librarian facing terminal cancer

Workers at the Boston Public Library are outraged over the decision by library management to break with a longstanding policy of allowing staff to voluntarily donate sick time to co-workers. Eve Griffin, who has curated the library’s fine arts collection for over a decade, was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer and, having exhausted her sick time, was denied access to co-workers’ sick time.

Griffin, who still works at the library despite a terminal diagnosis, has been forced to take time off without pay to deal with her medical condition.

Griffin attended the library’s Board of Trustees meeting on February 4 to ask the board to consider her case. As she was overcome with emotion and unable to finish her statement, a co-worker stepped forward to read her appeal. But the board refused to respond, claiming it could not discuss personal matters. In a later release, library management said “we are required to implement the City of Boston’s policies for sick leave and paid time off ...”

Library worker Bryce Kieren Healy told CBS News, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen everyone so collectively and thoroughly disgusted. I really don’t know how you can get up in the morning and look at a woman with terminal stage four cancer, who is fighting to come to work every day, and make the decision they’ve made. It really boggles my mind, but it really appalls me to the core frankly.”

An online petition on behalf of Griffin has garnered thousands of signatures.

New Jersey mall cleaners carry out two-day protest strike

The 60 workers who clean the American Dream Mall in East Rutherford, New Jersey, walked off the job February 16 on a two-day unfair labor practices strike. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ charges that Purely Local, a company which contracts cleaning operations for the mall, illegally compelled workers to sign arbitration agreements that bar workers from filing complaints with government agencies such as the National Labor Relations Board.

Mall workers have been on a two-year campaign to secure better wages and benefits. Initially, the mall management hired HSA as a contract cleaner, but canceled the contract after an HSA manager was alleged to have sexually harassed two workers. Purely Local was brought in back in August 2024.

Twice in February of this year, Purely Local management has slashed workers’ hours: from 40 to 35, and again from 35 to 30. The SEIU calculated the cut will reduce annual wages by \$8,840 under conditions where workers are currently paid only \$17 an hour.

Workers are contemplating extending their strike. In December they carried out a similar two-day strike and have mounted demonstrations in their struggle for a contract.

Alberta school support workers continue vote on strike mandates

Over the past week five more Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) education worker locals have voted to take job actions up to and including full strikes. These include 800 custodians at the Calgary Board of Education, 350 janitors and maintenance employees in the Calgary Catholic School District, and, just outside Calgary, 570 educational assistants (EAs) and support staff at the Black Gold School Division and another 300 EAs in the Foothills School Division. Just west of Edmonton at the Parkland School Division, 400 EAs who have voted for job action have filed a 72-hour notice to begin a work-to-rule campaign this week.

None of the other locals receiving strong mandates last week, up to and including an all-out strike, have as of yet filed notice with the provincial government labour board to begin any sort of job action.

The average support worker in Alberta earns \$34,500 per year. However, the EAs—who make up the lion’s share of the support workforce—earn on average only \$26,400. The union locals are being offered a paltry 3 percent wage increase that is to be spread out over four years.

Strikes for decent wages amongst school support workers could spread to another 5,000 educational assistants, librarians, cafeteria workers, school nurses and administration staff over the next 10 weeks as the right-wing government of Premier Danielle Smith continues to starve the provincial education system of funding. All told, about 40 union locals could find themselves in a strike position by early spring.

Already, on January 7, about 1,000 public and Catholic school workers in Fort McMurray walked out on a full-time strike after intermittent, rotating job actions begun last November failed to move forward negotiations for decent wages and working conditions. The Fort McMurray workers first took job action on November 13 after rejecting the recommendations of a disputes inquiry board appointed by the province.

Then on January 13, 3,000 public school support workers in Edmonton and 200 more in the outlying Sturgeon school district began job actions to pursue demands for a significant wage increase, better education funding and additional classroom support. Already, about 200 educational support assistant jobs remain unfilled, placing additional stress on the remaining staff and special needs children.

To begin the Edmonton strike, CUPE officials limited picketing to only three schools. In the Sturgeon public school district, which covers the surrounding towns from Redwater to Morinville to St. Albert, the union has limited job action to rotating strikes and a work-to-rule.

Schools remain open, although services, particularly for special needs students, have been curtailed. School boards have begun hiring strikebreaking substitute teachers at wages higher than the striking workforce earned.



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