Workers Struggles: The Americas

Thousands rally against pension “reform” in Chile; Brazil oil workers stage 24-hour strike

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Brazil oil workers carry out one-day protest strike

On Friday March 28, oil workers went on a one-day strike against the Petrobras oil company across Brazil. The workers are demanding better representation in negotiations with the government majority-owned company as well as the right to keep working from home and against cuts in benefits tied to company profits (PLR). The strikers are members of the Sindipetro PE/PB trade union (Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers).

The protest-strike opposed Petrobras’ plans to end hybrid employment (replacing the current two days on the job with three days physical presence), a change that the company has scheduled for this April. In addition, the workers are demanding no layoffs, better working conditions (six workers died on the job in 2024) and a 30 percent cut in PLR, to benefit stockholders.

Up to now, promises by the Sindipetro PE/PB bureaucracy of a strike of indefinite duration as demanded by the membership, have not been fulfilled. Union leader Sinésio Pontes indicated that there are no plans for a new strike or for workers’ assemblies to discuss and vote on the issue.

In terms of employment, since 2016, Petrobras has laid off over 40,000 workers.

Argentina tire workers hold 24-hour strike

On March 26, members of the tire workers union (SUTNA) went on strike against FATE, Pirelli and Bridgestone tire companies to protest 1,400 layoffs throughout 2024 and 2025 coupled with speed-ups and wage freezes, despite increasing monthly inflation rates. The tire bosses are refusing to negotiate.

The Buenos Aires tire manufacturers are relying more and more on temp workers, as part of deals with the SUTNA apparatus.

On Wednesday, striking tire workers joined the weekly protest march of retired workers and their supporters in downtown Buenos Aires.

In retaliation, the day after the walkout, FATE, the leading Argentine tire company, carried out a layoff of full-time workers and their replacement by temps. Under threat of layoff, workers were told to accept a new set of working conditions at the FATE plants. In response, workers walked out and the strike has been extended through March 31.

Thousands in Chile protest new pension legislation

Over 5,000 workers and students marched and rallied in Santiago de Chile on Sunday, March 30, against legislation approved by Congress on Friday March 29 that preserves Chile’s Private Pension system, the AFPs, and worsens conditions for workers while protecting corporate profits.

The reactionary AFP system was initiated in 1981, under the US-supported Augusto Pinochet dictatorship. It replaced a public, government run, social security system with a privatized system, in which hedge funds invest workers’ money and consistently register large profits, while keeping pensions ultra-low.

This latest attack by the Boric administration was supported by the so-called “coalition of the 3 lefts” in Congress (including the Communist Party and Social Democracy) and the right-wing parties. President Boric celebrated the vote with great fanfare, indicating that employers are now required to contribute 8.5 percent of workers’ wages (workers are taxed 10 percent of their wages) into the individual AFP funds, while making the AFP financial managers more competitive.

According to recent reports, under the current system, 50 percent of the AFP pensions pay less than US$360 per month (below the minimum wage of US$500 per month) and 32.4 percent percent of seniors 65 and over are in danger of malnutrition.

California judge breaks strike, orders Silicon Valley transit workers back to work

A Santa Clara County, California, judge ruled the 17-day strike by 1,500 transit workers for the Silicon Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) was illegal and ordered workers back to work March 27. The strikebreaking order came two days after members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 265 voted down the latest proposal by management by an 80 percent margin.

Superior Court Judge Daniel Nishigaya based his decision on the grounds that the old agreement had a no-strike clause in it. But the old agreement expired on March 3 and on March 9 workers walked out after the VTA’s 9 percent wage offer failed to come even close to the 19.1 percent rise workers were demanding. The VTA’s most recent wage offer of 11 percent over three years did nothing to mollify workers and further aggravated the situation by reintroducing terms involving attendance and overtime that had been removed from the table earlier in negotiations.

ATU Local 265 President Raj Singh conceded defeat without a battle. “We’ll see what happens tomorrow shortly, but we believe the judge got this wrong. At the end of the day, the workers lost.”

University of Southern California janitors prepared to strike for wages and benefits

Janitors at the University of Southern California rallied March 28 to demand better wages and benefits and protest Aramark Corporation’s foot-dragging in contract negotiations. The 200 members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) have been in negotiations for months and the old agreement expired three months ago.

This was the third demonstration by workers and the second one in March. Workers carried a banner and signs declaring they were “ready 2 strike.” Negotiations resume this week.

Aramark is listed as the 21st largest employer on the Fortune 500 list with over 266,000 workers. It contracts for food and services at facilities for education, prisons, healthcare, sports and other corporations. It operates in North America and 14 other countries, including the United Kingdom, Germany, Chile, Ireland and Spain. CEO John Zillmer raked in $18.7 million in compensation during 2024.

University of Illinois faculty could strike April 4

An estimated 650 members of the United Faculty of Illinois State University could strike as early as April 4 to reduce workloads, which currently prevent them from having adequate time to interact with students, and to win decent wages, leave policies for new parents and caregivers, and university commitments for student mental health support. Founded in 1857 as Illinois State Normal University, ISU is the oldest public university in Illinois. It is located in the Bloomington-Normal metropolitan area, 130 miles southwest of Chicago.

On March 21, faculty members overwhelmingly voted to authorize a strike, after more than a year of negotiations. Union officials are scheduled to meet with administrators and federal mediators on April 2 and April 4.

“As faculty, we are dedicated to ensuring that our students get the high-quality education and services they deserve,' said Dr. Derek M. Sparby, Associate Professor of English. 'To continue to attract and retain world-class educators at ISU, this administration must bargain a fair agreement that shows they value our faculty and recognize what our students need to reach their potentials here at ISU. If President Tarhule and his team want to avoid a strike, they need to fulfill their responsibilities to this university and its students immediately.”

Alberta education workers end job actions as union imposes sellout “pattern” deal

Last week, striking education workers in the last of nine separate school divisions spread across Alberta voted (by 68 percent) to accept a new contract. The ratification at the Foothills School Division brings to an end a series of job actions that began amongst both public and Catholic school board workers in Fort McMurray last November.

Then in early January, in and around the provincial capital of Edmonton, 3,000 more non-teaching education workers began their own strikes. Over the subsequent weeks and months the strike movement ballooned to include more than 6,600 education assistants, custodians, librarians, school cooks and nurses as well as administrative staff including in the province’s largest city, Calgary, and surrounding districts. Many of the job actions began as work-to-rule or rotating strikes before developing into all-out strike activity.

The strikers include members of various locals in the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). The workers have been pursuing a significant wage demand in defiance of the right-wing government of Premier Danielle Smith’s ongoing public sector wage restraint program. In Alberta, the Smith government increasingly uses a provision in the 2019 Public Sector Employers Act that allows the finance minister to provide “secret mandates” to employers that dictate how much can be offered in negotiations. The precise content of the mandated wage limitation is not shared with the unions during bargaining.

The average support worker in Alberta earns $34,500 per year. However, the Education Assistants—who make up the lion’s share of the support workforce—earn on average only $26,400. As information from public sector bargaining sessions leaked out, workers learned that they were being offered a paltry 7.5 percent wage increase to be spread out over four years, from late 2024 through 2027. The meager offer came on top of several years of wage freezes before and during the pandemic and only 1.5 percent in 2023 and another 1.25 percent in 2024.

Although schools remained open as teachers remained on the job and school boards began employing retired teachers to perform educational assistant work, disarray in the schools continued to grow. Parents of students with significant disabilities were ordered to keep their children at home while an increasing number of students were moved to rotating “learn-at-home” days.

In the end, a new basic “pattern” contract was offered and accepted by the strikers over the past several weeks. That deal provided for 3 percent for the year beginning in September 2024; then $1.25 or 3 percent (whichever is higher) in 2025; 3 percent for 2026 and in 2027 another $1.25 or 3 percent (whichever is higher).

The contract settlements were heralded by union officials who had recommended the new deal as a massive victory for workers. Yet a closer look shows that school workers continue to receive poverty wages. Between 2018 and 2023, they received over the five-year span a total 2.75 percent wage raise. During that time inflation raged at 17.65 percent resulting in an actual real wage reduction of 14.9 percent. The new contract fails to make up for that significant wage cut and provides future increases that do nothing to bring education workers out of poverty.