

Workers Struggles: The Americas

Police assault pensioner protest in Argentina, Ontario Workers Compensation civil servants strike

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

Police assault on pensioners' protest march leaves 80 wounded in Argentina

On Wednesday, May 21, police attacked the weekly Social Security protest march and rally in downtown Buenos Aires, leaving 80 wounded and arresting two supporters of the Anti-Fascist Group and two press photographers.

As the marchers were approaching Congress Square, they were surrounded by members of the Federal Police. The security forces claimed they were acting according to an "anti-picketing protocol" imposed by Security Minister Patricia Bullrich.

Pensioners and their supporters were pushed, struck and attacked with a large amount of teargas, directed at their faces and eyes.

As in previous marches, members of the press were targeted. The Buenos Aires Press Workers Union denounced the arrest of two photographers, Tomas Cuesta and Javier Iglesias, and demanded their release.

The marchers are demanding pensions that keep up with inflation.

Education workers protest in Mexico City and Chiapas

Members of the National Committee of Education Workers (CNTE) rallied on Friday, May 23, at Mexico City's International Airport, after Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum canceled a meeting with union officials.

At the same time, members of the National Union of Education workers (SNTE, a CNTE break-off) blocked the road that links San Cristóbal and Tuxtla Gutiérrez in the southern state of Chiapas.

Both protests demand the elimination of anti-labor legislation passed in 2007, which undermined retirement rights and benefits for all public employees.

As the demonstrators surrounded the Mexico City airport, hundreds of police with anti-riot weapons blocked access to the airport.

In Oaxaca state, local union leader Yenny Aracely declared: "Our protest is not over an extra vacation week, nor are we asking changes in retirement age tables ... The concrete demand is the elimination of the 2007 Security and Social Services Law for Public Employees [ISSTE]."

The 2007 law changed public workers' retirement benefits from "fixed

benefits" to "fixed contributions," with no guarantee of benefit amounts and administered by profit-making private investment groups.

Triggering both protests was President Claudia Sheinbaum's cancelation of negotiations between her and the trade unions. A CNTE spokesperson declared that, as in the past, Sheinbaum talks but does not listen to the educators' demands, saying, "Hers is a 'deaf ears' monologue in defense of the financial interests of the Administrators of Retirement Funds (AFORES)."

The protests follow a 24-hour educators' strike on May 15 demanding the elimination of the ISSTE law. Following the strike, the educators set up a permanent picket in Mexico City's Zocalo square.

In addition, teachers are demanding wage increases and better working conditions.

"March of Silence" in Uruguay honors those disappeared under the dictatorship

Marches and rallies took place in Uruguay against injustice and demanding an account of those that were disappeared by the military.

On May 20 tens of thousands protested in cities and towns across Uruguay demanding that the government provide answers about those abducted and killed by the military during the 1973-1985 dictatorship.

In Montevideo, several thousand marchers chanted "Never again," "Where are they?" and "Respond!"

The military dictatorship in Uruguay, together with those in Argentina, Brazil and Chile, imposed brutal repression on the working class under the US-engineered Condor Plan. During that time, thousands of workers and youth were persecuted, captured, tortured and killed.

This was the 30th annual march, which always take place on May 20, the anniversary of the deaths in Argentina of Zelmar Michelini, Hector Ruiz, Rosario Barrero and William Whitelaw in 1976.

Coca Cola workers in Paraguay protest layoffs and extreme exploitation

On May 23, Coca Cola workers and truck drivers rallied in San Lorenzo city, site of the Coca Cola bottling plant in Paraguay, to protest against low wages, speedups and contingent employment. The workers are demanding an eight-hour day, a pension plan, social security retirement benefits, health benefits and safe working conditions.

Workers denounced a system of extreme exploitation, which forces

many to work 18 hours a day for a US\$13 daily wage with no compensating time off. The plant employs 600 part-time drivers, hired by 10 independent contractors.

The protest was triggered when three workers involved in starting a union were summarily fired with no explanation.

Grand Rapids, Michigan teachers protest low pay, short staffing in district schools

Teachers for Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) held a protest and intervened at the school board meeting May 12 to demand the district increase wages and deal with the chronic understaffing plaguing the system. The GRPS board has refused to move off its 1.5 percent wage increase offer as the union contract heads for expiration in June.

Average salaries for GRPS teachers rank 21st out of the 21 public school districts in Kent County. In response, the Grand Rapids Education Association (GREA) has requested a 7.5 percent pay increase in the new three-year contract in an effort to stanch the loss of teachers.

During the board meeting's public comment period, one teacher spoke up, saying, "I'm sick of surveys. Stop asking questions, read the responses and go from there. I'd rather have a pay raise, please. I don't need another goodie bag."

Malori Salamango, a resource teacher, announced her resignation at the board meeting, charging that the district's refusal to confront the caseload problem was putting "pressure on teachers. ... That's how you isolate teachers, burn them out. That's how you lose teachers like the resource teacher before me, and that is why I am resigning from my position."

GREA Vice President Jayne Niemann told Mlive, "What's the point of recruiting talent when you have a dozen people resigning every month on the personnel transactions report. All the 100 teachers that they hired in August; I would bet you that half of them have left."

Six California Planned Parenthood clinics unanimously vote to authorize strike

The union representing healthcare workers at six Planned Parenthood California Central Coast (PPCCC) facilities announced May 12 that workers voted unanimously to authorize strike action after months of negotiations have transpired. Members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which includes medical assistants and physicians, have centered their dissatisfaction on understaffing at the facilities.

In a statement, Mike Solemar, a physician at PPCCC, complained workers are "constantly understaffed ... Patients are waiting longer and sometimes not getting seen at all."

The six California clinics are located in San Luis Obispo, Santa Maria, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Thousand Oaks and Oxnard. The SEIU has not set a strike date and state law requires the union to grant a 10-day strike notice before a walkout begin. Besides the safe staff issue, PPCCC management claims there are still "a few outstanding items remaining" to be settled in negotiations.

The clash at the PPCCC clinics takes place amid actions taken by Congress that threaten to defund Planned Parenthood by blocking the provider from being reimbursed by Medicaid. At the same time, California Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has proposed a \$500 million cut in health care provider payments funded by Proposition 56 that

Planned Parenthood says would hinder its ability to provide services.

Strike of thousands of Ontario workers' compensation civil servants

About 4,000 public sector workers employed by the Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) began the first strike in the history of the organization last week in pursuit of relief from brutal workloads, an adequate wage increase and changes to an intimidating and stressful workplace culture.

Workers have been offered a meager three-year wage increase of only 2 percent in the first year, 1.5 percent in the second year and 1 percent in the final year. During the inflationary spike over the course of their last contract workers' real wages had already fallen by 5.25 percent.

Ninety-six percent of the workforce, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, voted for strike action. Although the vast majority of the workers struck across the entire province in the first two days of the walkout, rotating strikes were then instituted.

This changed again on Monday when workers restarted their all-out indefinite strike. Management has advised those using WSIP services to access information only via the internet and have stated that there will be delays in processing claims and inquiries.

According to its website, the WSIB provides wage-loss benefits, medical coverage and support to help people get back to work after a work-related injury or illness. It is funded by premiums paid by Ontario businesses and covers over 5.3 million workers in the province in more than 300,000 workplaces.

As it stands, injured workers across Ontario looking for workers compensation payments face a system that throws up serious roadblocks.

For instance, other than certain post-traumatic stress illnesses, the WSIB does not generally support mental health claims. In addition, civil society organizations as well as lawyers representing injured workers have found that management can ignore sound medical advice regarding readiness to return to work, reduce or deny claims by blaming "pre-existing conditions" for injuries clearly suffered at work, rely on untested "expected recovery times" to declare a worker healed, and purchase reports from private medical consultants who never meet the worker and have been found to ignore available medical evidence.



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