

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

## Alberta hospital union strike; Workers at Portland, Oregon New Seasons Market vote to strike

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

### Public health workers in 24-hour protest strike in Uruguay

Health workers across Uruguay carried out a 24-hour protest-strike November 18, including marches and rallies demanding budget increases for the public healthcare sector. The protest took place as the National Legislature was voting on next year's budget.

In Montevideo, the strikers rallied at city hall and then marched on to Uruguay's government house, known as the Executive Tower, with signs and chants demanding higher wages, and better working conditions, including an end to contingent work, and lowering the retirement age. The strikers also called for the restoration of Social Security and lower medical costs for the poor.

### Argentine government workers stage one-day protest strike over "labor reform"

Government workers belonging to the State Workers Union (ATE) went on a 24-hour national strike November 19, against Argentine President Milei's proposed "labor reform." In Buenos Aires strikers joined the weekly mass protest by social security recipients and the unemployed. The strikers also denounced the economic pact between the Milei and Trump administrations.

The details of the proposed labor reform have yet to be announced, but workers suspect that it attacks the right to unionize and to strike.

Responding to the strike, march and rallies, Argentina's security minister, Patricia Bullrich, threatened to prosecute the ATE bureaucracy for being a threat to public safety.

The protest strike included government workers in health, logistics, communications, immigration, social security, welfare and air traffic control.

In the last two years of no wage increases, public workers have lost 23 percent of their purchasing power. Thousands live below the poverty line.

### Hemophilic patients in Ecuador demand essential medications

On November 19, people suffering from hemophilia (who lack blood-clotting proteins in their blood) rallied in Ecuador demanding the immediate provision of essential medications that they need to live.

At the rallies, held at public clinics across Ecuador, families pointed out that without coagulation medicines patients are in danger of dying from even minor falls and cuts. The protests exposed the serious public health crisis in Ecuador, where thousands suffering from hemophilia and other chronic diseases, including cancer, have no access to essential medications.

Ecuador's Social Security Institute lists 51 essential medications that are completely absent from public clinics.

### Refinery workers in Brazil strike Petrobras' Gabriel Passos Refinery

Contingent workers at Petrobras' Gabriel Passos Refinery (REGAP) in Belo-Horizonte, Brazil, walked off their jobs on November 18. The issue is wages. The workers, whose commission pay is based on Petrobras' profits, are demanding equal pay to workers in São Paulo's San Jose dos Campos refinery, whose commissions and food-vouchers are twice as high.

The REGAP temps are calling for the support of all Petrobras workers and are also suing Petrobras.

### Bluelink Chile call center workers strike

On November 14, 300 Call Center workers employed by Bluelink Chile went on strike. Bluelink Chile is a call center for Air France and KLM airlines. The strike has caused the cancellation of dozens of flights daily throughout the week.

Bluelink Chile workers typically handle over 6,300 daily bookings for Air France and KLM, plus services for Platinum, VIP, and private clients.

At issue is management's refusal to negotiate with the union over wages and working conditions—this is the first bargaining since the union was established in 2024. Currently call center workers are paid the legal minimum wage.

Strikers also declare that they face conditions of speed-up and overwork. In addition to a wage increase, the workers are demanding paid days off.

Throughout the week, picketing strikers have had to confront and block the entrance of strike breakers hired by the company, which is also suing the union in court.

## **Workers at Portland, Oregon New Seasons Market vote to strike**

About 1,130 workers at 11 New Seasons Market stores in Portland, Oregon, have voted by an 83 percent margin to grant strike authorization and set a target date of December 17 after nearly two years of fruitless bargaining. The workers organized during a period from September 2022 and December 2023 independently as the New Seasons Labor Union (NSLU) and later affiliated with the United Electrical & Machine Workers of America.

“We are unbelievably overworked and understaffed during the holidays,” stated NSLU co-chair Ava Robins. “We don’t want to let this fight drag on into another year. It’s been too many years already that we’ve been in bargaining.”

Workers are demanding that hourly starting wages increase from the current \$16.30 to \$20. Store management’s offer to workers at the high end of the wage scale is a mere 3 percent.

Past practice of the company was to award health insurance for workers logging 24 hours weekly. New Seasons wants to increase that to 28 hours per week. NSLU charges that would eliminate coverage for some 50 workers. The union seeks to maintain the 24-hour threshold and retain the current workers’ cost of health premiums.

New Seasons started up in 2000 and passed a majority stake in 2012 to the private equity firm Endeavour Capital. In 2019, the Korean retail company Emart purchased New Seasons.

## **Harvard custodial workers carry out two-day strike**

Custodial workers at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, carried out a two-day strike beginning November 17 to demand wage increases to combat the increasing cost of living. Over 800 members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 32BJ struck against two companies, C&W and ABM Industries, that contract for janitorial work with Harvard.

The walkout failed to produce a settlement, as Harvard pointed to “current financial challenges and ongoing uncertainty,” part of which stems from the Trump administration’s threat to cut funding to the school.

“Aside from some bonus signing money, Harvard and its contractors only offered average annual increases of 2.2 percent per year — far below regular cost-of living increases, and even farther below what it will take to get ahead in these times of working people’s affordability crisis,” said Kevin Brown, an executive vice-president for the SEIU chapter.

Elena Lavarreda, SEIU 3BJ division director said, “While we disagree with what the Trump administration has done, the consequences of that can’t fall on the backs of some of the lowest-paid workers on campus. There are folks here who worked through the pandemic, people who got incredibly sick.”

The two sides, which have been bargaining since October 7, are preparing for continued talks.

## **Lewistown, Pennsylvania healthcare workers authorize strike after hospital ignores wage demands**

Some 150 healthcare workers at Geisinger-Lewistown Hospital in Lewistown, Pennsylvania, have authorized a strike as their demand for increased wages is getting little response from hospital management after

months of negotiations. The bargaining unit under the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), is comprised of nursing assistants, environmental services workers, dietary aides, patient transporters, maintenance and other essential workers, some of whom receive an hourly wage as little as \$15.25.

Dietary worker Allysea Price, stated in a union release, “I could be making more by working at a local gas station, but I want to serve my community in healthcare. Geisinger needs to give us real pay raises that will help solve the high turnover rate, ensure quality care, and allow healthcare workers to live and work with dignity.”

The old contract agreement expired on November 14. According to the SEIU, hospital management’s largest wage offer has been 26 cents per hour. The union has not proposed a strike date but instead is calling for a November 25 Thanksgiving rally.

The Geisinger hospital is owned by Risant Health, based out of Washington D.C. It operates in Central North Carolina and northeastern and western Pennsylvania. Risant, in turn, was set up with \$5 billion in seed money by California-based Kaiser Permanente.

Kaiser and Risant reported revenue of \$115.8 billion for 2024, a gain from the \$100.5 billion reported in 2023. Back in February, Geisinger nurses carried out a five-day strike.

## **Alberta hospital union shuts down strike**

This past Saturday morning, officials from the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) announced that a “last minute” tentative contract had been agreed between the collective bargaining team representing 16,000 practical nurses and healthcare aides and management’s negotiators for Alberta Health Services. However, the workers were not then notified of the proposed deal and had already set up large, boisterous picket lines in Edmonton and elsewhere in the province.

The union had announced early that morning that no deal had been reached. So, when the contract deadline expired at 8:30am, workers began walking off the job. At Edmonton’s Royal Alexandra Hospital pickets had swelled to over one hundred workers before word came later that same morning that union officials had reached a deal in the “final” minute, and all strikers must immediately dismantle picket lines and return to work.

The licensed practical nurses and their healthcare aides had voted by 98 percent for strike activity earlier this month and were demanding a significant wage increase and action to increase staffing levels to reduce grueling shift schedules and workloads. Last year, the 33,000 Registered Nurses in the province agreed to a contract settlement that provided for a 20 percent wage rise spread over four years. The LPNs, however, have been offered only a 12 percent increase over the same four-year period.

In the last-minute deal, union officials bowed to management’s insistence on the inferior general wage offer that workers had already found unacceptable. In addition, the proposed contract did not contain any movement by management to redress serious understaffing issues. However, union officials announced that management had agreed to make certain grid payment increases retroactive to late April 2024 and appealed for workers to ratify the contract on that basis when the deal comes up for a vote over the next two weeks.



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