

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Latin America

On Thursday, May 23 Argentine public school teachers, state university professors, and administrative staff went on a nationwide protest strike over wages and working conditions. Pensioners, public health workers, government educators are being hurt the most by inflation as a result of the Milei administration's economic shock policies.

In Misiones province, scene of some of the most militant protests last week, striking teachers were assaulted by government gendarmes in the city of Posadas.

Educators are comparing Milei's austerity policies with those of President Carlos Menem in the 1990s, a free-market Peronist much admired by Milei.

In addition to wage increases, the strikers are demanding the reinstatement of the National Teaching Incentive Fund, recently eliminated by Milei.

"We demand educational funding for universities and other institutions in the mandatory system. We demand the reinstatement of FONID and an increase in the compensation amount for inequalities," said Angelica Graciano, a CTERA union leader.

Manuel Adorni, a high official in the Milei administration, declared that protests and strikes notwithstanding, the government policies would continue.

Meanwhile, on May 25 (Argentina's Independence Declaration Day) President Milei travelled to the industrial city of Cordoba as part of the celebration. Hundreds of public employees, members of the Government Workers Association (ATE) blocked his entry into the city.

Government gendarmes sent to repress the

demonstrators managed to open the road out of the airport for Milei, after being initially overcome by their own tear gas due to sudden changes in wind intensity and direction. The president spoke from the steps of the Provincial Government House, behind police barricades, to a reduced crowd surrounded by protesting public employees.

On Thursday May 23, teachers, members of the Unitary Union of Peruvian Education workers (SUTEP), carried out a national one-day strike. The teachers' main demand was that the public education budget be increased to 6 percent of GDP. A SUTEP statement enumerated the main issues that confront teachers and students, including social inequality in education, inadequate education policies and poor teacher training.

According to the strikers, more than half of school buildings should be torn down and rebuilt, 60 percent of students suffer from malnutrition, and 79 percent have no internet. Many schools lack electricity, water, and sewage.

On May 20, the Mothers and Family Members of the Disappeared collective, and other human rights groups, led a massive March of Silence in Montevideo, and other cities in Uruguay. The marchers demand that government authorities reveal all the available information and data on the disappeared during the military dictatorship (1972-1985). It is a yearly event, held since 1996.

In Montevideo it begins at a monument dedicated to the memory of those that were "disappeared" by the military during the years of dictatorship; it ends at a rally in Liberty Plaza two kilometers away. The date chosen, May 20, commemorates the assassinations of four opponents of the regime in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1976.

Following the end of the dictatorship, successive "democratic" governments have refused to make public any information on the fate of the more than 5,000 people "disappeared" by the dictatorship.

United States

Trash haulers for the city of St. Louis, Missouri, staged sickouts on May 13 and 14 to protest low pay, heavy workloads and poor treatment from management. The city's Refuse Division charged the sickouts were an "unauthorized work stoppage," due to the fact the workers did not conduct the action through the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union.

City alderman Rasheen Aldridge conceded the workers' complaints were justified, telling the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, "They already don't get paid enough. To be disrespected at the same time is unfortunate." Management claimed they were unaware of any specific demands but would consult with AFSCME union officials.

According to the city, 18 of 50 drivers participated in the sickout on Monday, followed by 16 the following day, causing backups in trash collection. Drivers have been working seven-day weeks in an attempt to keep up with collections, which are at a historical low.

In the past, an aging fleet of trucks created problems when as many as half of the fleet were under repair. When the pandemic erupted, the city implemented a hiring freeze and began diverting recycling product to the waste pickup drivers and combining it with trash.

Nursing home workers at Absolut Care in Westfield, New York, voted by a 97 percent margin May 16 to authorize a strike after almost four months of bargaining has failed to resolve their demands. However, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) did not issue the required 10-day notice for implementing the strike and new negotiations resumed the day after the strike vote.

Absolut Care workers in Aurora Park, Orchard Brooke and Allegany have also been negotiating for a new contract since April. More than 300 licensed practical nurses, certified nurse assistants, home health aides, patient care assistants, medical techs, housekeepers, cooks, and dietary workers are covered by the negotiations.

Karly Beaujean, a licensed practical nurse at the Westfield facility stated, "We are constantly burned out. When new staff come in, they end up leaving. If we were able to offer the same or better wages like other nursing homes in our area, then hopefully new workers would stay and help us give the residents the care they deserve."

Besides staffing and economic issues, the SEIU website indicates that Absolut Care wants to insert contract language that will limit workers' rights concerning job actions.

Canada

Road maintenance and parks workers rejected a four-year tentative agreement presented to them last week by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 107. The agreement was meant to cover 770 outside municipal workers employed by the City of London.

The rejection of the union recommendation came as a surprise to union officials despite the miserable terms of the proposed deal. CUPE spokesperson Eric Bell told the *London Free Press* that "talks with the local and the city were very amicable—they had a deal they thought they were able to take to members, but members sent a message they want to continue improvements to the collective agreement."

Although the union has refused to publicly release the specific terms of the rejected contract, city officials had used last autumn's contract with 800 indoor employees organized by CUPE as a basis for negotiations. That new three-year contract provided for wage increases of 3.2 per cent in the first year and 3 percent in each of the following years. The deal was retroactive to January 1, 2023.

Any contract based on that offer would amount to a real wage cut for outside workers, who have seen their wages significantly eroded over the life of their last contract. That agreement included a paltry wage increase of almost 8 percent spread over the four-year term (or less than 2 percent per year) in circumstances where spiking inflation steadily rose to almost 10 percent in the province by 2022-23.

Even though no date has been set for future negotiations, CUPE officials have taken no initiative for a strike.



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