

# 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

Confronted with heavy penalties on their wages, discounts for their days on strike of between 50 and 100,000 pesos, mostly affecting elementary school teachers, educators and health workers in Misiones Province went on strike again last Wednesday.

Strikers blocked highways demanding that management cancel the wage penalties, agree to wage increases that compensate for inflation and increase the education and health budgets.

Anticipating protest marches and rallies at the state legislature, the government marshalled its repressive apparatus and threatened strike leaders and militant workers with arrest and jail time.

Last Thursday, railroad workers slowed down passenger and cargo trains in Greater Buenos Aires to 30 kilometers/hour, demanding better working conditions, wage increases that keep up with inflation, and investments to keep up the maintenance of rails and trains.

A national rail strike will take place on June 4 if there is no response from the Milei administration. So far there has been no response.

Workers are demanding a 289 percent wage increase to compensate for inflation and have rejected a government offer of 208 percent. They are also demanding that the government restore funds cut from the rail budget. The Milei administration recently reduced the railroad budget by 59 percent.

On Sunday, May 27, the Association of University Professors at Venezuela's Central University (APUCV), called for a major wage increase. "Lacking decent working conditions, it is impossible to attract talented academicians," declared the association in a Twitter post. Professors indicate that, since their retirement and health benefits are also tied to their wages under the current contract, compensation has depreciated over 76 percent in real terms during the last two years.

The monthly minimum wage in Venezuela, a point of reference for all other wages, 130 Bolivares, has depreciated 88

percent in real terms since it was set in 2022. A family of five would have to earn 166 Bolivares minimum (US\$552.29) to afford a minimally adequate amount to eat, given an explosion in the price of food.

Contingent workers at Chile's Puerto Coronel rejected a May 20 agreement with port authorities that had been mediated by the Ministry of Transportation and initiated a hunger strike. The workers claim that the contract goes against their demands outlined when the strike began as a management lockout on March 26. At that time the company accused part-timers of engaging in a slow-down to protest the company's drug and alcohol policies.

Port authorities now reject these "pressure tactics" by the part-timers, which, they say, "imperil their health," and are demanding that the Transportation Ministry intervene. The dockworkers union, which represents both part-time and full-time workers, has stopped sending workers for tasks involving wood and cellulose transportation.

## United States

The New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) announced May 28 the 600 nurses at Ellis Hospital and Bellevue Woman's Center in Schenectady, New York, voted by a 94 percent margin to authorize a three-day strike. The old agreement expired in February 2023 and the union and management have been deadlocked over staffing ratios and compensation.

However, the NYSNA has not issued the mandatory 10-day strike notice to the hospital. Negotiations resumed May 28.

Earlier in May, the NYSNA filed an unfair labor practices charge against Ellis Hospital over intimidation and surveillance tactics used against nurses discussing workloads and negotiations. One week before the strike authorization, a New York state arbitrator ruled that hospital management had consistently failed to observe safe staffing levels and ordered Ellis to compensate nurses in a number of departments.

NYSNA has analyzed data from six units of the hospital covering the period February to November 2023 and found day and night shifts were understaffed over 90 percent of the time. Nurses believe the staffing problem is further exacerbated by a

merger agreement in 2022 with St. Peter’s Health Partners. Nurses are also angry about the millions of dollars the hospital spends on so-called travel nurses, who are paid \$28 an hour over what NYSNA nurses are paid.

Over 200 employees and supporters descended on the annual shareholder meeting May 29 at the headquarters of Dollar General. The protest comes after a week of actions in nine states to protest low pay and unsafe working conditions at the giant chain store’s retail operations. Dollar General locked down its headquarters in response to the workers’ protest.

Dollar General worker Kenya Slaughter told WVLT, “We’re not trying to shut the stores down, we want them to be accountable for the workers that are dying, that are suffering in their stores.”

Another Dollar General worker, Dave Williams, said, “The message has always been the same and is very clear—we just want better for all workers, all workers who go through the grind, all workers who put their blood, sweat and tears into this thing. This year, I had a closer interaction with the CEO—he shook my hand twice. Then he started gaslighting me, talking about how brave I was from last year. I told him, this isn’t about bravery—I’m not doing this for me. I’m doing this for my people. We’re trying to survive and be better in life, and we can’t do that while we’re looking over our shoulders at work, praying for safety, and all the while we’re getting paid so little.”

Dollar General has accumulated \$16 million in fines from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. At the last shareholder meeting in May 2023, shareholders approved a resolution to create an independent audit into worker safety and well-being. But the move turned out to be a “sham,” according to Step Up Louisiana, one of the organizations leading the protest. To carry out the audit, Dollar General hired a firm that has been labeled a “union-busting” organization.

## Canada

Last week about 13,000 Saskatchewan teachers, working without a contract since August 2023, rejected a proposed contract settlement. It was the second time in May that teachers refused to ratify a tentative contract. In the most recent vote, teachers rejected another sell-out settlement by 55 percent. That tentative contract had been unanimously recommended by the leadership of their union, the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation. Earlier in May, teachers had roundly rejected another unsatisfactory deal by a robust 90 percent.

Since the beginning of the dispute teachers have centered their contract demands around government funding for the provincial education system to address class size and increased resources for student support specialists (referred to as “class

complexity”). The hard-right provincial government of Saskatchewan Party Premier Scott Moe has underfunded the education system for years and has promoted the development of “alternatives” in the education system, including options for homeschooling and independent private schools.

The government has advised parents of students with special needs, even those enrolled in public schools, to hire their own specialists at their own expense. The Moe government has refused to bargain issues of funding (and hence class sizes) with the union, claiming that the matter rests with local school divisions despite a December ruling by a third-party conciliator that such issues are indeed items for the bargaining table.

Teachers also are demanding significant improvements in compensation. Saskatchewan teachers are the lowest paid in Canada. Currently, their average annual pay is only \$39,863, which breaks down to an unsustainable \$19.17 per hour.

Last week’s rejected contract proposal tossed aside any serious address of questions of class complexity with the offer of a “special task force” to look into the matter further and a miserable \$18 million to be placed into education budgets. There was no specific mention of the key class size issue. On monetary issues, the proposed deal offered a paltry 8 percent salary increase over three years, retroactive to 2023, plus a one-time market adjustment of 1 percent.

Since the new year, Saskatchewan teachers have taken part in a number of strikes and other job actions. On January 16 and 22, thousands of teachers engaged in one-day, province-wide strikes when negotiations with the province hit a wall. On February 1, five locals of the STF launched a third day of rotating strikes at school boards across the province. In April and May teachers engaged in two brief periods of work-to-rule actions. After last week’s contract rejection, the province and the union agreed once again to re-start negotiations.

After voting by 98 percent for strike action, 550 workers at the Taseko Gibraltar copper mine set up picket lines on June 1 in a fight for improved wages and working conditions. The workers are members of Unifor Local 3018. The strike began one day after the expiration of the previous contract on May 31. The mine, located north of Williams Lake in the province’s central interior, is the second largest open pit mine in the country and is the main employer in the Cariboo Region.



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