

Workers Struggles: The Americas

Unions issue five day notice of job action at Ontario community colleges; Pratt & Whitney machinists protest furloughs in Connecticut

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

Rio de Janeiro State municipal workers demand back pay

Health, education workers and public employees in the city of Belford Roxo, Rio de Janeiro State, held a protest rally in that municipality's City Hall on Monday, December 30, 2024. The Belford Roxo protest involved several hundred educators and health workers who broke through police barricades, confronted police and guards and surrounded City Hall, demanding immediate payment of back wages.

At issue is the refusal of the city government to pay two months of overdue wages plus the customary year-end one-month bonus, due on December 20, leading workers to protest at city hall on New Year's Eve. Belford Roxo's Mayor Wagner Carneiro is a close ally of President Lula.

The protest coincided with Carneiro's last days in office. Despite the protests the previous week, Carneiro has so far refused to respond to the city workers' demands.

Several cars, including Carneiro's, were pummeled with eggs.

The issue of wage delays, particularly the "13th month," is not new in Brazil, due to high levels of municipal debt in the last few years. In 2021, many workers did not receive their year-end bonus until July.

Several other Rio de Janeiro cities have robbed workers of the year-end bonus, known in Brazil as the "13th month," including Cabo Frio, São Gonçalo, São João de Meriti, Seropédica, and Teresópolis, all centers of the tourism industry.

Families of children murdered by Ecuador army demand justice

On January 2, hundreds marched behind the parents of four children murdered by the Ecuadorean Armed Forces on Christmas Eve. Josué and Ismael Arroyo, Saúl Arboleda and Steven Medina were abducted from a soccer field by armed officers in the city of Guayaquil and taken away. Their bodies were later found near an air force base near this port city.

The parents led the Funeral March, which extended for 8 kilometers, carrying signs demanding justice and repudiating the government of fascistic president Noboa and the militarization of Ecuadorean society.

The murder of these youth was not an isolated incident; it takes place in the context of a murderous "war on crime," which has normalized torture and extrajudicial murders by armed soldiers and police.

Machinists rally at Connecticut Pratt & Whitney plant

Three to four hundred machinists protested January 3 outside Pratt & Whitney's jet-engine plant in Middletown, Connecticut, against the company's imposition of unpaid furlough days. Most of the 3,000 members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) at plants in Middletown and East Hartford will be affected by the forced furloughs that began January 2, with another scheduled for July.

In a press release, Pratt & Whitney stated that the furlough's reflected the company's "planning for supply chain gaps and lighter production." The IAM countered that

the company has \$100 billion of back orders.

Contract talks between the company and two separate IAM locals at the two Connecticut plants begin in May with the current agreements set to expire May 5. Workers are demanding increased wages and an end to the two-tier retirement benefits, with the provision of a defined benefit pension for all workers.

Hawaii nurses to strike for safe staffing ratios

The Hawaii Nurses Association (HNA) announced January 2 that 159 nurses at the Wilcox Medical Center on Kauai island voted by a 76 percent margin to strike January 14 through 17 after months of negotiations had failed to move hospital management towards safe staffing ratios. The old agreement expired August 31, 2024.

This follows a vote by 1,900 nurses at Queen's Medical Center campuses of Punchbowl and West Oahu on the island of Oahu to hold a three-day strike beginning January 13.

The HNA has filed several charges with the National Labor Relations Board against Hawaii Pacific Health, which operates the Wilcox facility, for "unlawfully interfering with the rights of employees who request union representation." According to the HNA Wilcox nurses face harassment, discrimination and retaliation by management and "are being put through hell because of their commitment to professionalism."

The union pointed out that, "Our island is changing and growing, and the current practices at Wilcox do not address the older and sicker population coming through our ER, OR and into the inpatient units." This crisis and the increased demands it places on nurses are at the center of the demand for safe staffing.

Ontario community college faculty union gives five-day notice of job action

This past Friday the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), which organizes some 15,000 provincial education workers in 24 community colleges, filed notice that job action in pursuit of a new contract can begin as early as Thursday, January 9.

But despite a strike mandate given by the membership in a vote last October, the union has yet to say what particular action will be taken. Such action could take the form of

anything from a work-to-rule campaign to an all-out work stoppage. Both sides have agreed to one final round of mediated bargaining on January 6 and 7. At this point, after 30 days of bargaining and 4 days of conciliation, both sides remain far apart on any contract settlement.

In 2021-22 the union rejected pursuing a full-scale strike in favour of a 13-week work-to-rule campaign that ended in binding arbitration that failed to address any of the unsatisfactory wage, job security or working conditions that faculty faced. In 2017, a five-week all-out strike was ended when the union-backed Liberal provincial government of Premier Kathleen Wynne passed back-to-work legislation.

OPSEU president at that time, Warren "Smokey" Thomas accepted the order and called the strike a "victory" simply because the government promised a "task force" to look into "staffing models" in the colleges. Since then, the critical issues around precarious work and compensation facing faculty not only remain unresolved, but have deepened.

The education workers are demanding a significant increase in wages, an end to unpaid labour and enhanced job security. Three-quarters of teachers, counsellors and librarians are employed under low-wage short-term contracts with little to no benefits or job security. In addition, the workload formula devised for the education workers has not been revised in 40 years. Today, about one-half of bargaining unit members are not paid for preparation time, student evaluations and curriculum development. The unpaid time can amount to a significant portion of the workers' labour.

The predicament faced by college employees is rooted in years of budget cuts by Ontario governments of all political stripes over the past several decades. In order to fund the Ontario colleges to the average of other provinces it is estimated that the disbursements by the hard-right provincial Conservative government of Premier Doug Ford would have to be doubled.

The College Employer Council (CEC)—the bargaining agent for the managements of the colleges—has insisted that the demands of the education workers are entirely unrealistic based on current government funding models, and continues to demand concessions, whilst the Ford government has called for more cost-cutting "efficiencies" at the tottering post-high school education facilities.



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