

Workers Struggles: The Americas

Argentine health workers defend key Buenos Aires psychiatric hospital

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On January 31, a mass rally took place in Buenos Aires in defense of Laura Bonaparte Hospital, a major national mental health institution. Its workers condemned layoffs that will empty the hospital and deprive thousands of patients of mental health assistance.

Joining the more than 200 mental health workers being laid off were other laid off workers from private and public health institutions plus retirees and members of neighborhood associations. Also present were university students, laid-off workers from the Dock Sud Shell Refinery and members of the public employees union (ATE), working and laid off.

At the rally, the protesters had organized cultural acts, including live music and solidarity speeches from neighbors and social organizations.

Workers hung a giant banner in the hospital balcony that read “with no workers, there is no mental health.”

President Milei has proposed the dismantling of mental health clinics and hospitals and the return to “madhouses,” asylums that existed in that country, and around the world, in the 19th century, where psychiatric patients were isolated from the rest of society and virtually chained to their beds. Such institutions were abolished in Argentina beginning in 1946.

The layoffs also shut down the 0800 number that provided urgent mental health services 24 hours a day.

Contingent hospital workers strike in Brazil's Rio Grande do Norte state

On Tuesday, Jan. 28, shouting “no salary, no work,” striking contingent workers marched along, and blocked main avenues in Natal, the capital of Rio Grande do Norte state.

The contingent workers employed by subcontractors JMT, Fortex and Justiz, and contracted out to municipal and state hospitals in Natal, work as stretcher-bearers, and provide concierge, cleaning and food services. They are owed 60 days of wages. In addition, the strikers are also demanding that their employers supply them with adequate health and supplies, such as masks and vinyl gloves, and lunch areas with access to refrigerators and microwave ovens for their food (“we even bring our coffee from home,” declared a striker).

UPMC Washington Health workers in Pennsylvania to vote on strike authorization

Some 300 healthcare workers at UPMC Washington Health will vote February 3 on whether to strike the Washington, Pennsylvania hospital over concessions and a miserly 1 percent wage increase offered by management. The proposed increase will amount to a mere 16 to 25 cents an hour for most of the surgical technicians, therapists, carpenters, dietary aids, records clerks, housekeepers, cooks and other workers represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

UPMC wants to increase health insurance costs and terminate overtime pay and abolish a pay scale based on years of service. This comes at a time when the hospital already faces a difficult situation in maintaining safe staffing

levels, placing a greater burden on remaining workers.

“UPMC executives care about filling their pockets,” said Melissa Duran, an EKG technician and the local SEIU president. “A lot of people are going to be forced to leave Washington if they only get a 1 percent raise, and that could hurt our ability to deliver quality care.”

Workers are angered over an \$18 million deferred compensation payout in 2023 to a retired UPMC CEO. The current CEO Leslie Davis pulls down a hefty \$11 million in compensation.

Baton Rouge transit workers authorize strike, protest low wages

Transit workers for the Capital Area Transit System (CATS) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, showed up at a Board of Commissioners meeting January 28 to protest the lack of movement in contract talks. Three days earlier, members of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1546 voted 102-4 to grant strike authorization after more than two years of negotiations have failed to produce an agreement over wages.

The ATU charges that wages for CATS workers are between \$4-\$5 an hour less than transit workers in relative proximity of Jefferson Parish, New Orleans and Shreveport. CATS has tried to fend off workers’ demands by claiming it lacks the funds to raise wages.

Anthony Garland, an international vice president for the ATU, who has been dispatched to Baton Rouge, said the union has “bent over backwards to try to get a contract with CATS.”

The old agreement was scheduled to expire December 31, 2024, but the ATU and CATS extended the agreement until January 31. Currently, there are no scheduled talks between the two sides, but ATU officials indicate they are not presently contemplating a strike.

Pennsylvania caseworkers hold one-day strike

Caseworkers for Armstrong County picketed outside the courthouse in Kittanning, Pennsylvania, January 31, in a one-day strike to protest low wages and stalled negotiations. The 12 case workers, members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 668, have been without a contract for seven months and are enduring a low starting

wage of \$16 an hour that leaves them understaffed and the workers impoverished.

County Commissioners Chairman John Strate defended the county’s 21 percent wage increase over a four-year contract by pointing out Armstrong County is a “depressed” county.

The county last hired a caseworker in 2023. Since that time, the county has been unable to fill 30 percent of caseworker positions. Local 668 President Steve Cantanese charges that Armstrong County has some of the lowest starting wages among Pennsylvania counties for caseworkers in child welfare.

Medical equipment workers at Best Theratronics into ninth month on strike

About 60 workers at an Ottawa-area Best Theratronics plant producing external beam therapy units for cancer treatment, self-contained blood irradiators, cyclotrons and other hospital equipment will only now begin negotiations with anti-worker owner Krishnan Suthanthiran. The striking production workers are members of Unifor, while the striking white-collar workers are members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). Their last contract expired 19 months ago.

The workers have seen an average annual wage increase of 1.1 percent over the past 16 years. Management’s last (rejected) contract offer demanded a wage freeze throughout the life of a two-year deal, with a derisory \$25 payment for new safety glasses. Suthanthiran had refused to negotiate with union representatives. Suthanthiran, dubbed in some reports as “Canada’s Worst Boss,” is notorious for denouncing Canadian workers as lazy and calling on employers and government to cut back on worker holidays.

In Belgium, where Suthanthiran shifted millions of dollars in assets from a nuclear medicine company he bought and quickly dissolved in 2011, the government was left with a €130 million bill for environmental cleanup. A criminal investigation by Belgian authorities against Suthanthiran remains open.



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