

## US independent trucker group calls for shutdown, protests in Argentina against austerity

# Workers Struggles: The Americas

9 April 2019

### Protests in Argentina over government economic policies

Tens of thousands of converged on the capital Buenos Aires April 4 to protest the Macri government's anti-worker economic policies. Protesters marched through pouring rain to the Plaza de Mayo, where speakers denounced the government's austerity measures. Called by the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the march and demonstration were also attended by social activist groups like Barrios Standing Up, Workers' Pole and the Evita Movement.

Protesters denounced Macri's US\$56 billion IMF loan, which has imposed more austerity and hardship on the already struggling workers and the poor. They demanded an end to attacks on social programs and increases in transportation and utility costs.

One group of protesters set up an encampment in front of the Social Development Ministry and demanded to speak to its head, Carolina Stanley. Police tore down some of their tents and arrested several protesters.

The response of the administration has been to label the protests as "mechanisms of political manipulation," and assert its refusal to negotiate in the face of "extortion."

### Paraguayan teachers, parents, students protest over unfilled positions

Protests that began March 28 at more than twenty schools in the Paraguayan city of Capiibary in San Pedro department have continued, as teachers, parents and students press their demand that unfilled positions at their schools be filled. Protesters have periodically blocked the main highway, Route 10, impeding traffic. The protesters are also demanding the resumption of works that have stalled.

Unfilled teaching positions, the result of the retirement of large numbers of teachers, are a problem throughout Paraguay. Nearly 3,000 teachers retired in the last six months, and it is estimated that 43,000 teachers will retire in the next 10 to 12 years.

When a position is filled, it is often not by a teacher who is qualified for the specific subject matter. In addition, as one student representative explained to ultimahora.com, the teacher cannot count on getting paid in a timely manner. She

mentioned one professor at her school who was hired and has logged 153 hours without getting a paycheck.

The Education and Sciences Ministry has promised that 100 percent of the positions will be filled by April 29, a highly unlikely outcome.

### Ecuadorian police attack protest by health workers over firings

Hundreds of former workers for the Ecuadorian health system held a protest April 4 at the plaza of the Carondelet Palace, the seat of government in Quito. The ex-employees, who came from various areas of the country, took the action to demand a meeting with representatives of the Health Ministry and Policy Secretariat.

The protesters were part of over 2,500 public health workers who were fired in early March as a result of closures and reductions of staff at public health, education and transport offices throughout Ecuador. They had been promised a meeting with government representatives to analyze the cases of about 1,500 of their numbers.

Over a hundred police on foot, horseback and motorcycles blocked their way and attacked them with pepper gas. At least five people were arrested, and several others were hurt.

### Guyana: One strike by sugar cane workers ends, another begins

A strike begun March 27 by sugar cane harvesters over pay and working conditions at the Blairmont Estate in Guyana ended on April 4. A Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) public relations officer told reporters that the issues, which involved workers transferred from the defunct Rose Hall Estate to Blairmont, had been resolved, though she did not go into specifics.

The same day, ex-Rose Hall workers at the Albion Estate walked off the job, accusing Albion management of frustrating and discriminating against them so that they would leave their jobs. Some have demanded severance pay.

Workers cited many complaints. In the first place, they have not been told where they will be taken to work until they get there. Even if they do not want to work at a site, the driver will

not take them back. Further, despite the crop being ready weeks ago, they have not been issued tools; they have had to on occasion travel nearly four hours to get to a worksite, where by the time of their arrival the sun was blazing hot.

The result has been a 60 percent drop in wages. Some workers are saying that they may as well quit rather than endure this treatment. They picketed in front of the compound, chanting that they wanted their severance pay.

About a hundred of those striking workers held a protest in front of the Rose Hall Estate, voicing similar grievances. GuySuCo claims that the strike is illegal and has threatened disciplinary action.

### **US independent truckers plan shutdown for April 12**

A group of independent owner-operator truckers have set April 12 as the date for a shutdown to protest low rates and regulatory issues. About 26,000 truckers organized on a Facebook page, Black Smoke Matters, have called for the action.

In an attempt to take wind out of the sales of the impending truckers strike, at the beginning of April at a trucking trade show, US Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao announced pending changes to the hours of service rules for truckers that have sparked opposition.

If there is widespread participation in a shutdown, it could have an almost immediate impact on supplies of groceries, medicine, gasoline and auto parts. Trucks move some 71 percent of US freight.

In 2018, according to the American Trucking Associations (ATA), 70.2 percent of all freight in the US was transported by truck. The US trucking industry had \$700.1 billion in annual revenue in 2017 with 1.7 million tractor-trailer drivers in the US. According to the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association trade group (OOIDA), there are approximately 350,000 to 400,000 US owner-operator truckers. The vast majority of US trucking companies are small, where 94 percent of carriers have less than 20 trucks in their fleets.

### **Pennsylvania healthcare workers hold protest over contract stalemate**

Some 60 healthcare workers staged an informational picket April 4 at Blue Hills Health and Rehabilitation Center in Stoughton, Pennsylvania to demand higher pay and a cheaper healthcare plan. Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) represents the nursing assistants, housekeepers and dietary staff.

The union is proposing to raise starting wages for Certified Nurses Aide from the current \$12.50 an hour to \$14 while requesting the rest of the staff receive a wage increase of 50 cents an hour. Workers are also complaining about heavy workloads.

Management broke off contract talks in February and has not met with the union since. One of the owners, Jonathan Bleier,

sent text messages to a SEIU official threatening to sell the facility and claimed he already had a buyer.

### **Brief walkout by resident and intern physicians at California hospital**

About 50 resident and intern physicians held a 20-minute walkout April 3 at Highland Hospital in a Los Angeles, California suburb to protest the course of negotiations, which began back in November. The Service Employees International Union, which represents the medical providers, says management is seeking to cut a patient care fund that resident doctors use to purchase work-related equipment and to stop reimbursing residents and interns for Drug Enforcement Administration licenses which allow them to write certain prescriptions.

Management also wants to cut food reimbursements for physicians, drop completely the requirement to perform maintenance on residents' break rooms and is resistant to a union demand for guaranteed access to wireless hospital phones. Highland Hospital is owned by Alameda Health System, which owns five hospitals and four clinics.

### **Quebec school bus drivers strike**

Drivers in three Quebec school boards in the Eastern Townships, east of Montreal, are scheduled to go on strike this week against multi-national transportation giant Transdev.

The two unions affected by the strike are affiliated with the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN). Union negotiators say that it is becoming difficult to retain workers at existing wages and that they are only asking for a wage increase that will bring them in line with other drivers in the region who are making as much as \$3 an hour more.

The union says the strike by approximately 125 drivers is only scheduled to last six days but it is not clear if or when bargaining will resume.

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