

Workers across the Americas protest lack of supplies, protective equipment

Workers Struggles: The Americas

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

Protests and job actions continue in Mexican hospitals and clinics over supply shortages

Medical, support staff and administrative workers in hospitals and clinics in Mexico have continued their struggles to get supplies and equipment to protect themselves from COVID-19. In some cases, they have been denounced by management and threatened with reprisals.

At Rural Clinic 51 in San Buenaventura, Coahuila, medical and administrative workers struck April 1 to demand N95 facemasks, gloves, protective clothing, antibacterial gel and other supplies. Striking workers blocked the entrance to prevent the spread of contagion until they get the needed equipment.

On the same day, at Clinic 9 in Frontera, also in Coahuila, medical personnel suspended a stoppage and protest that they began March 31 over supply shortages and the authorities' failure to take measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus. They had complained that the only test that patients and personnel were given upon entry was their temperature and overt signs of COVID-19 contagion. Under threat of reprisals and firings, they returned to work, but without the provision of necessary supplies.

The most serious outbreak took place at General Regional Hospital 7 in Monclova, a city of 230,000 in Coahuila. On March 15 a truck driver, admitted with symptoms of "atypical pneumonia," was hospitalized in the emergency room, where he was in contact with three shifts of medical personnel for a week. Despite a written request to have him tested for COVID-19 and to provide protective gear, authorities dragged their feet. The patient succumbed on March 27; one of the doctors who treated him died on April 1.

Since then, there have been at least 37 confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection at the hospital, which is part of the Social Security Institute of Mexico (IMSS) system. Doctors and nurses have denounced the IMSS for its failure to provide supplies, unfulfilled promises, minimizing of the extent of the outbreak and threats against workers.

One doctor told *El País* that she began to have symptoms the week before, but that her application to be tested was denied, forcing her to travel 350 km (220 miles) to the Autonomous University of Coahuila in Torreón and pay 2,500 pesos (US\$105). "They tell us that we're exaggerating, but this is already costing my medical colleagues' lives. If we don't protect ourselves, we're going to take all this problem to the community and it's going to overflow."

On April 3, the IMSS Warehouse announced the dispatch of a truck with supplies, including N95 masks, gowns, antibacterial gel, disinfectant soap, protective gloves and other items to the Monclova hospital.

Police injure three Mexican avocado orchard workers, one reporter at blockade

Avocado cutters in the municipality of Uruapan, Michoacán, Mexico suspended their labor and blocked a highway in the community of Caltzontzin on April 1. The orchard workers' actions were motivated by fears of the spread of COVID-19 among the more than 3,000 cutters in the area.

State police were dispatched to the protest and attempted to dislodge the protesters, who had thrown tires in the road. Some confrontations ensued, with police firing shots, injuring three protesters and one reporter. The Michoacán Journalists Association condemned the attack on the journalist, Lucero Díaz Estrada, and demanded an investigation by state prosecutors.

Mexican hotel workers protest firings, nonpayment at resort hotels

Workers at hotels in the tourist resort city of Cancún began strikes April 3 to protest massive firings and refusal of payment of benefits by businesses. The action was called by the Workers and Peasants Revolutionary Confederation (CROC).

In the face of the plunge in tourism due to coronavirus fears, hotels in Cancún, Solidaridad, Cozumel, Chetumel, Puerto Morales and Isla Mujeres have declared that they are incapable of paying their workers, and some have closed completely. The government of the state of Quintana Roo announced March 28 that it would sanction businesses that carried out unjustified firings.

The state Conciliation and Arbitration Boards had received dozens of complaints in mid-March as the sackings increased. The numbers since have grown into the hundreds. One hotel specifically targeted by CROC is the Omni Cancún, which tried to cut salaries across the board and refused to pay benefits.

Strikes at Colombian hospitals over dire conditions, lack of supplies, wages

In the Colombian municipality of Luruaco, workers at the ESE Hospital have gone on strike over not only the lack of supplies and equipment, leaving them unprepared for the coronavirus pandemic, but over nonpayment of salaries and benefits, in some cases going back months. The mayor of the town of 23,000, in the department of Atlántico, claims that she had attempted to meet with the previous director on five occasions, but the meetings never materialized.

The ESE Hospital is indebted to about 30 workers, who have not received wages or any benefits—including vacation pay, pensions and copays—for four months, bringing on the strike call. In addition, ambulances have empty gas tanks and workers have no uniforms or protective equipment.

The mayor blamed the previous ESE director for the crisis, but hospitals in other areas of Colombia are gravely unprepared for the coronavirus pandemic, having been defunded and ignored for years by the government. In various cities in the Caribbean region, over 200 workers

have gone on strike, according to a publimetro.com report.

Coronavirus infecting postal workers

Some 4,420 postal workers are under quarantine as a result of possible exposure to coronavirus, according to the United States Postal Service and the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC). Already some 294 have tested positive for COVID-19 with 8 deaths. Postal workers nationwide are reporting a lack of protective equipment and cleaning supplies for its 630,000 workforce.

In an April 3 statement, Fredric Rolando, president of the NALC, said to union members, "USPS has committed to provide daily supplies necessary for postal employees to clean frequently touched items in the office as well as provide necessary supplies for letter carriers to use to clean steering wheels and other frequently touched surfaces in postal vehicles. ... You should have sufficient hand sanitizer to keep your hands clean all day as you touch the many surfaces on your route."

But letter carriers deny this to be the case and in another statement, Rolando admitted, "In some places, all of these things are being done. However, in too many places they are not."

Irvine, California nurses protest lack of protective equipment

Over 50 nurses at the UCI Medical Center in Irvine, California staged a protest April 3 over management's refusal to provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and disciplinary measures against nurses who wear masks in areas where they are restricted. Nurses marched from the hospital to UCI Health administration facility to deliver a petition but were denied entry to deliver it.

"We're here to fight," Maria Louviaux, a UCI Health nurse, told CBSLA news. "Even just to wear our surgical mask throughout our shift, we have to fight for that, and unless nurses meet certain criteria, we aren't allowed to wear masks. In fact, we are intimidated and on the verge of bullying at times by managers and directors."

Nurses claim the hospital has N95 respirator masks, but they are kept locked up. According to a management statement, the hospital is "keeping PPE secure so they are available for health care workers who need it," essentially barring nurses from their use.

Saskatchewan oil refinery to force vote on massive concessions contract

With the lockout of 750 oil refinery workers in Regina, Saskatchewan now in its fourth month, Federated Cooperatives Limited (FCL) management have applied to the provincial Labour Board to force a vote by the Unifor Local 594 membership on what the company calls its "best and final offer." The proposed deal presented by FCL contains a list of deep and sweeping concessionary demands on pensions, jobs and working conditions. The vote is expected to take place around the third week of April.

In March, mediator Vince Ready had tabled his nonbinding recommendations for a resolution of the bitter dispute that has seen FCL deploy a large scab workforce, with the full support of the right-wing Saskatchewan Party government, the capitalist courts and police.

Ready's report had granted virtually all of the company's initial concession demands. The union, which had already proposed a series of increasingly draconian concessionary climb-downs, accepted the mediator's recommendations and scheduled a vote advising the workers to accept the rotten deal. On the weekend prior to the vote, the union, signaling abject surrender, withdrew pickets from the refinery gates.

Workers, starved out on the picket line and seeing no way forward, voted 98 percent to endorse the mediator's recommendations. After the vote, local union President Kevin Bittman cynically told reporters that Ready's report, which contained everything the workers had fought against for almost four months, was "a reasonable compromise."

However, FCL then refused to accept the nonbinding recommendations from mediator Vince Ready. The company cited the downturn in the oil industry due to the economic slowdown caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing collapse of stock and oil prices, to demand even deeper cuts, in particular, to pensions.

The union, fearing a backlash from workers, has not recommended acceptance of the deal in the upcoming vote while Unifor President Jerry Dias made pathetic appeals to the ardent pro-business Saskatchewan Party Premier Scott Moe to end the lockout on the basis of the Ready report.

For over a decade, the Saskatchewan Party government has mounted major attacks on workers' rights and living standards, including restricting public sector workers' right to strike through "essential services" legislation. At the beginning of last month, the premier personally exhorted the police to smash worker blockades of FCL operations.

Workers across Canada protest unsafe conditions amidst pandemic

As shortages of personal protective equipment persist across the country, nurses in London, Ontario stopped work on 11 occasions citing their right to refuse unsafe working conditions last week. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, established medical procedures require hospital staff to change masks before attending to each new patient. However, because of equipment shortages, London hospital authorities have allotted only four basic masks per shift, a process which threatens to transfer the virus from patient to patient. The superior N95 masks are reserved for front-line staff performing intubations and other specialized procedures.

The nurses' action in London echoes similar work refusals in Alberta and Manitoba medical facilities over the past two weeks. Work refusals amongst jail guards in Ottawa, construction workers in Ontario and Quebec, Alberta meat inspectors and Canada Post workers continued last week. In Toronto, bus drivers, seeking to protect themselves and their passengers, are only allowing about 15 people onto their vehicles at any given time.

Fourth Ontario education union agrees to tentative deal

Officials in the Ontario Public Service Employees' Union (OPSEU) organizing education support workers agreed to a tentative contract with the right-wing government of Premier Doug Ford last week. The deal follows similar tentative settlements by officials organizing teachers in the public elementary schools, Catholic schools and French language schools. Workers in the various unions will vote on the contracts over the next several weeks. Details of the agreements have not been released. The government is now negotiating with the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation. All schools in Ontario have been closed since mid-March due to the coronavirus and will remain shuttered until at least May 4.

The move to end the months-long series of rotating and province-wide strikes by 200,00 Ontario teachers and support workers began in the wake of a powerful one-day general strike by teachers on February 21. Terrified by the mass mobilization of education workers and the broad support they enjoyed within the population, the unions moved the following week to shut down all further job actions and negotiate with the government on the basis of contract concessions.

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