

Health care workers in Colombia protest over 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.

### **Colombian health workers protest lack of supplies, pay delays**

Health workers held a protest in Bogotá, Colombia on May 21 to protest the government's failure to provide adequate personal protection equipment (PPE) to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. The action was supported by the Bogotá Citizen Watchdog and the Colombian Medical Federation.

The protesters denounced the poor quality of the PPE that they have received, as well as outrageous overcharging, as much as 1,000 percent, often after delays in promised delivery. They blame the government of right-wing US ally Iván Duque for this neglect, which has played a role in the infections of nearly 1,000 health workers and the deaths of at least 12.

In addition, they called for an end to delays in the payment of salaries, saying that many health workers have not been paid for months.

According to colombiareports.com, Health Minister Fernando Ruiz "did not respond to either the protests or the concerns of the civil and health organizations over the alleged persistent neglect in the response to the pandemic."

### **Ecuadoran workers, indigenous people protest recently passed "humanitarian" law**

Workers, peasants and members of social organizations held protests on May 18 against the May 15 passage of a law that supposedly would alleviate harsh conditions for working people. In reality, as reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The right-wing, pro-US government of President Lenín Moreno has exploited the pandemic to push through

further austerity measures designed to meet the demands of the IMF and foreign capital. Packaged under the cynical guise of a "Humanitarian Support Law," the government has lifted subsidies on fuel prices and imposed cuts in the hours and salaries of workers."

In the capital Quito, demonstrators gathered in front of the Social Security headquarters and carried signs declaring "No more firings," "We demand labor stability," "Out with the corrupt ones!" and "They keep firing us and the state does nothing!"

Similar protests took place in other cities. In the southwest port city of Machala, protesters marched to the seat of government complex to protest firings of teachers and other workers and the lack of provision of food. Protesters carried a cardboard coffin bearing the slogan "The Humanitarian Law is Death."

Among the unions and organizations that called the mobilization were the Popular Front, the National Indigenous Federation, the National Educators Union and the Unitary Workers Front.

### **Strikes and protests by mass transit workers in Argentina over pay, labor instability**

Workers of the urban transport company 18 de Mayo in General Roca, a city in central Argentina, voted May 20 in two separate assemblies to continue the strike they began May 12 over wage and job security issues. On that date, in the midst of the pandemic quarantine, they received their monthly checks, but only a partial amount, 20,000 pesos (US\$293). Although they were later paid the remainder, they were not reassured that they would be paid for May, or that they would keep their jobs.

They found out that the 18 de Mayo board of directors, who had gained the concession barely a month before, was considering discontinuing service if

subsidies could not be guaranteed. In a letter to the budget secretary, the board cited a number of unanticipated developments—the COVID-19 pandemic, the fall in economic activity, demands by transport workers union UTA for salary payments, and rising inflation among them—that they claimed made it impossible to continue providing service.

Meanwhile, to the northeast in Rosario, UTA drivers voted May 22 to strike until at least May 27 to demand progress in negotiations and the full payment of wages. Further north in the city of Santa Fe, UTA called drivers back to work after Autobuses Santa Fe deposited 50 percent of wages, although uneasiness persists about the ability of the company to continue paying. In Córdoba, 360 km (224 miles) to the west, 21 UTA officials were indicted for breaking the quarantine by calling for a protest at which 500 members, who had been on strike for two weeks over wage issues, participated.

### **Strike by Johnson Controls workers in Albany, Missouri**

Workers at the Johnson Controls plant in Albany, Missouri are on strike after rejecting a contract offer from management that workers said was unacceptable.

There are 162 employees at the plant and the vast majority of them are participating in the strike. Workers cite excessive overtime, lack of hazard pay and lack of PPE. Sheet Metal Worker Local 2 said workers voted down a proposed contract May 15 by a massive majority. The old contract expired March 31.

Workers are forced to work 10-12 hours a day seven days a week, with only one Saturday off per month. The workers have been labeled “essential” employees, forcing them to work during the pandemic with little protection.

### **New Brunswick lockout of waste management workers now in third month**

Twenty-three landfill workers continue to fight against their February 13 lockout in the northern New Brunswick town of Allardville. The workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have been without a contract since December 2017. The workers are resisting attempts by the Chaleur Regional Services Commission (CRSC) to impose restrictions on unpaid leave, sick time and vacation

days.

One week into the lockout the CRSC, which is composed of mayors from the region’s towns and villages, brought in scabs to perform the work of the union members. When workers repelled the scabs, the CRSC was granted a court injunction limiting picketing to only six, allowing scabs to easily breach picket lines. The locked-out workers are receiving only \$300 per week in picket duty pay.

The use of scab labour has become an increasingly common occurrence in Canadian labour disputes. The CRSC has employed the services of AFIMAC, a global firm specializing in recruiting scab labour and security personnel. Earlier this month, the City of Fredericton—the capital of New Brunswick—contracted AFIMAC to recruit scabs in a brief lockout of outside workers. In previous years, AFIMAC has also been deployed against strikes at the University of New Brunswick and at Halifax Water in nearby Nova Scotia.

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