

Workers struggles around the world

Canadian gold miners strike

16 May 1998

With this posting, the World Socialist Web Site is initiating a new feature for our readers called 'Workers struggles around the world.' Each weekend we will provide a round up of strikes and other important struggles, as well as articles on the conditions of the international working class, gathered by our correspondents in Europe, North America, Australia and Asia. We invite workers and others to contribute to this feature by sending information to: editor@wsws.org

One hundred and eighty gold miners struck the Con Mine in Yellowknife, Canada May 14. The workers, members of the United Steelworkers union, are opposing company demands for wage and benefit cuts as well as unsafe working conditions and seniority problems. The mine's owner, the North Vancouver-based Miramar Mining company, eliminated 130 staff and hourly positions from its workforce last December. Gold mining companies internationally are driving down production costs because of falling gold prices caused by a glut on the market.

After overwhelmingly rejecting the company's 'final offer' which included concessions in health care benefits, 1,230 workers struck the Peterbilt truck assembly plant in Nashville, Tennessee, on May 3. The strikers are members of the United Auto Workers union.

More than 90 percent of New York City's 12,000 yellow cab drivers carried out a one-day strike May 13 to protest demands by Mayor Rudolf Giuliani to raise fines and make it easier to suspend taxi drivers licenses. The mayor has blamed cab drivers for traffic congestion and accidents and suggested that they be replaced by lower-paid van operators. Taxi cab drivers typically work 12 hour shifts, six days a week. The last time cab drivers went on strike was in 1965.

Following massive financial losses at Sunbeam, the chairman of the home appliance maker, Al Dunlap, announced May 11 the axing of 6,400 jobs. The cuts represent 40 percent of the company's workforce.

Sunbeam reported a loss of \$7.8 million for the first quarter of 1998 compared to a profit of \$20.6 million one-year earlier. Revenue fell by \$244 million, primarily because of a 15 percent drop in US sales. The decline came largely

from the failure of a barbecue grill promotion designed to boost stock prices by artificially inflating fourth quarter profits.

Dunlap, whose penchant for massive downsizing has earned him the nickname 'Chainsaw Al,' ordered the closing of eight plants and 33 warehouses as well as the consolidation of 10 regional headquarters. Some 2,300 jobs in the US and another 2,800 jobs in Mexico and Costa Rica will be eliminated. Plant closings include Sunbeam appliance plants in Acuna, Mexico and Mexico City; Coleman plants in Pocola, Oklahoma, Cedar City, Utah and Costa Rica. Other plant closures include a Mr. Coffee plant in Cleveland, a fire extinguisher plant in Aurora, Illinois and a machine shop in Maize, Kansas.

Dunlap's career epitomizes the ruthlessness of American capitalism. As CEO of Scott Paper, Dunlap oversaw the elimination of 11,000 jobs. After finishing there he left the company with \$100 million in salary and bonuses. In mid-1996 he became head of Sunbeam. Within four months Dunlap had slashed 6,000 jobs, one-half Sunbeam's workforce. As a result of a stock deal he arranged on taking the helm at Sunbeam, Dunlap pocketed \$55 million when the company's share value soared in the wake of the layoff announcement. Dunlap recently published a book titled 'Mean Business,' providing guidance to business executives. One of its chapters is titled 'The Best Bargain is an Expensive CEO.'

Negotiators for Northwest Airlines and the International Association of Machinists (IAM) resumed contract talks May 13 in Washington D.C. for the first time since April 9. The resumption of negotiations has taken place under conditions in which the growing anger among the airline's 40,000 workers has been expressed in various protests over the last month, including the strict observance of work rules by machinists. An industry analyst estimated that losses from the wave of flight cancellations and delays caused by the protests would slice \$19 million from the company's anticipated second-quarter profits.

Northwest responded by dispatching management personnel to keep a watchful eye on workers and with a rash

of suspensions against mechanics and ground crew workers. In Minneapolis, eight workers have been suspended.

The current struggle has its origins in the 1993 concessions contracts which took \$1 billion dollars away from Northwest workers. Union officials who pushed the deal as the only way to save the company from bankruptcy were rewarded with seats on NWA's board of directors. While the company has returned to profitability and its executives have reaped millions in salaries, bonuses and stock options, workers' wages have remained flat and working conditions have worsened.

Eighteen months of negotiations between the company and the three largest unions-- the IAM, the Air Line Pilots Association and the Teamsters, who represent fight attendants--have failed to produce a contract.

A year-long inquiry by the *Cincinnati Enquirer* has revealed that Chiquita Brands International, a worldwide exporter of bananas, habitually uses production methods that directly threaten the health of its workers and local residents.

For example, in a Costa Rican barrio hundreds of people have been exposed to toxic chemicals emitted from a Chiquita subsidiary, Polymer Plastipak. The plant makes plastic bags impregnated with a pesticide called chlorpyrifos, used to protect bananas from insects. It can cause paralysis, nerve damage and death in humans. The report says many workers employed on Chiquita subsidiary farms have been affected by pesticides, with deaths caused by exposure to toxic chemicals.

The company has effectively controlled several Central American governments, allowing it to engage in illegal business and industrial practices, avoiding restrictions on land ownership and security laws. During a 1994 strike by banana workers against the closing of Tacamachie plantation in Honduras' Sula Valley, a union official was brutally murdered on the plantation. In 1996 500 military soldiers with automatic weapons and bulldozers forcefully evicted more than 600 farm workers from their homes before razing the village to the ground. The village had been created by Chiquita, then called the United Fruit Co., in the 1930s to house workers for its farms.

About 50,000 Fijian workers took part in a one day strike on April 23 after the government attempted to limit wage rises to 3 percent in 1998, despite a 20 percent devaluation of the Fijian dollar last January.

The government of General Sitiveni Rabuka placed the army on alert to maintain essential services, but hospitals, power and water supplies, the airport and many government offices were unaffected.

The Fiji Trade Union Congress (FTUC) called the strike after talks with the government broke down. Prime Minister Rabuka and his cabinet rejected a draft agreement to drop

the wages cap and accede to other union demands for redundancy arrangements and the introduction of union dues checkoffs.

The government abandoned the wage cut, but refused to discuss the other demands. The redundancy pact sought by the unions merely stated that redundancies would be a 'last option' by employers. It would clear the way for the unions to accept layoffs if employers claimed there was no alternative.

Rabuka is now insisting that redundancies and union dues checkoffs be negotiated directly by the unions with the various employers. The Fiji Employers Federation said it 'was not prepared to accommodate' the agreement. FTUC national secretary Pratap Chand has threatened further strike action unless the government makes a formal accord with the unions.

Public sector workers, members of the unofficial Korea Confederation of Trade Unions, have threatened to take national strike action after June 5. The KCTU's 550,000-strong public sector section covers railway, subway and bus workers, as well as hospital and telecommunication workers and taxi drivers.

The union leadership said the strikes would oppose mass layoffs and the replacement of permanent workers with temporaries. However, its central demand is for a joint government-union committee to oversee 'public sector reform' -- that is, the destruction of jobs and working conditions.

In February the KCTU, together with the more conservative Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), accepted the scrapping of the 'life-long employment system' and signed an agreement with the government and big business to change labour laws, clearing the way for mass sackings.

The Korea Employers Federation issued a statement this week warning that the strike would 'constitute an anti-state act' and demanding that the government of President Kim Dae Jung take strong legal action against striking workers.



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