

Workers Struggles Around the World

30 May 1998

We invite workers and others to contribute to this weekly feature by sending information to: editor@wsws.org

Japanese airline strike threatened

Flight crews of All Nippon Airways (ANA), Japan's second largest airline, have threatened indefinite strike action in early June to oppose a new wages system designed to reduce take home pay.

ANA pilots struck last month against the wage plan, forcing the cancellation of 120 international flights, but the union called off the action on April 20 shortly before the beginning of the peak holiday period.

Transport Minister Takao Fujii last week appealed to union leaders not to strike, saying he hoped the strike could be avoided. 'It's around the time of the World Cup and the timing is bad.' The union has indicated it will give exemptions, including flights from Indonesia for Japanese nationals 'if the situation there again deteriorates.'

Thai teachers jobs axed

Over 400 teachers from private vocational schools throughout Thailand will lose their jobs in the next weeks. Private school and college operators plan to downsize their staff to hedge against the effect of the economic crisis that has resulted in a 30 percent drop in enrollments this year.

Over 130 teachers jobs will be axed from schools in Bangkok, 118 in the Central Region, 104 in the north, 30 in the south and 15 in the northeast. Many of the schools, mostly small and medium-sized, face serious financial problems.

Prathuang Wipastawat, principal of Chamni Technology School, Samut Prakan, said only 150 new students had applied this year, although he had expected about 500. Ten percent of the school's 750 students had dropped out and many others had no money for tuition fees.

Nualthip Phantumchinda, assistant manager of Bangkok Commercial and Technical College, said only three students had enrolled for classes for occupational education certificates this year, against 40 last year.

Protests against Iran's ruling mullahs

Protests and strikes have swept cities in Iran this month in opposition to the growing assault on living standards and the repressive measures of the Khatami Islamic government.

In the northern city of Rasht, workers at the Gilan Carpet plant and the Gilan sock factory went on strike against the nonpayment of wages. Joined by workers from a nearby blanket factory, the strikers blocked the main Rasht-Fuman and Rasht-Anzali highways to press their demands.

In Qazvin, west of Tehran, bakers have been on strike since May 10 in protest against a 30 to 50 percent increase in the price of flour. People forced to queue for bread openly condemned the government for driving up prices.

In the southwestern city of Ahwaz the government responded to the growing unrest by tightening security and unleashing a crackdown. In one incident a 20-year-old man was publicly hanged after writing anti-government slogans on walls. In retaliation workers and youth attacked and beat up 20 of the government's Revolutionary Guards in Ahwaz's Abolfazl Mosque.

Australian building workers demonstrate

Over 120,000 construction workers went on strike for 24 hours last week to oppose attempts by building companies to slash working conditions.

In Sydney 5,000 workers marched through the city and in Melbourne 2,000 workers demonstrated outside of the offices of Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith.

The employers are seeking to casualise major parts of the workforce to remove holiday entitlements, cut weekend penalty rates and abolish wage payments when workers are stood down in wet weather.

The Howard government's Workplace Relations Act allows minimum working conditions to be stripped back to 20 items. Employers can demand the elimination of conditions deemed to be 'inefficient work practices' or that 'restrict productivity.'

The government was able to pass the Act in 1996 after the unions called off opposition following the storming of parliament by over 5,000 workers, including building workers.

Australian mining union agrees to sacrifice coal jobs

The mining union in Australia is holding membership meetings this week to push through an agreement with BHP Coal to give the company free reign to slash jobs and working conditions at its five remaining mines on the New South Wales south coast.

The 'Survival Agreement' is the first to be struck since miners endorsed a recommendation last month allowing the union to seek 'framework agreements' with individual companies. It allows the destruction of nearly 400 jobs over two years from the 1,369-strong combined workforce at the Tower, Eloura, Cordeaux, West Cliff and Appin mines through 'voluntary' and forced redundancies. Productivity will be driven up from 8,500 tonnes to 10,000 per man per year.

All demarcation will be abolished to 'maximise flexibility' and further changes to work practices can be imposed after notifying the union and following a six-month trial. The union has agreed to suppress all industrial action.

The agreement will serve as a blueprint for other BHP mines and for rival mining companies. This week miners at BHP's Moura open cut mine in central Queensland will vote on an agreement that cuts 200 jobs from the 380-strong workforce and eliminates work practices to speed up production.

The drive for increased production has cost many lives in Moura. The most recent incident occurred in 1994 when 11 miners were killed by an explosion at the company's underground mine. Management sent them below knowing that a highly dangerous situation existed.

The union will meet this week with another major coal company, Cyprus-Oakbridge, to discuss a similar agreement to slash 710 jobs from three mines in the Hunter Valley. The union has helped the company to axe 600 jobs in the past year.

Australian sugar workers locked out

Management of the grower-owned South Johnston sugar mill, near Innisfail in far North Queensland, locked out 50 members of the Australian Workers Union on May 26 after negotiations on a new enterprise work agreement broke down.

Members of the other two unions on site, the Electrical Trades Union and the Metal Workers Union, who have already signed the agreement, reported for duty but went home after the lockout occurred.

Australian Sugar Milling Council general manager Jean De Marchelair said lockouts were now a normal procedure when negotiating new

agreements. Similar measures had been employed by two other mill owners over the previous 12 months.

Honduran banana workers leader assassinated

Two unknown gunmen shot and killed Medardo Varela, the head of a movement that forced US banana companies to pay compensation to thousands of workers sterilized by years of exposure to dangerous pesticides.

The killing took place May 12 in Sava, north of the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa. Sava was the former base of the American fruit grower Castle and Cooke.

Varela and several other union leaders had initiated a movement to demand restitution for 5,000 banana workers at the Castle and Chiquita plantations who were made sterile through exposure to dangerous pesticides.

In April the Honduran government held the fruit growers liable, ruling that the chemical product known as Megamon had caused the sterility. Megamon was banned in the United States in 1977 after it was shown to cause blindness, sterility and cancer in humans. Despite the US ban, American-based agribusinesses continued the use of the pesticides in Honduras. None of the plantation workers had been issued protective clothing or were even aware of the health dangers they faced.

Hoffa opponent dropping out of election

The main opponent of Teamsters presidential candidate James P. Hoffa is close to dropping out of the race, increasing the likelihood that the son of former Teamster President Jimmy Hoffa will be elected to the top union post.

Ken Hall, the head of the Teamsters small package division, is reported to be on the verge of announcing his withdrawal. The reason he cited is an upcoming eye operation. Hall stepped into the race after a government appointed overseer barred incumbent Teamsters President Ron Carey after the exposure of his role in an illegal scheme to divert union funds into his reelection campaign. The Teamsters for a Democratic Union shifted its support to Hall after Carey's disbarment.

A new candidate, Tom Leedham, director of the Teamsters warehouse division, entered the race May 22. The TDU initially passed over Leedham in favor of Hall. The new Hoffa challenger is said to be not well known and to have few connections outside his West Coast home base. With balloting set to begin in mid-September, Leedham will have little time to put together the resources needed to organize an all-out campaign.

Press reports indicate a substantial defection of pro-Carey local union officials to the Hoffa camp. The Hoffa campaign recently announced that 19 locals that supported Carey in 1996 had switched sides. The ease with which whole sections of the union hierarchy are switching sides undermines the claim of TDU that the 1996 Hoffa-Carey contest represented a principled choice between union reformers and corrupt old guard mafiosi.

United Auto Workers union to join Daimler board

IG Metal, the German union that represents auto workers at Daimler-Benz AG, has agreed to give up one of its seats on the company's board of directors in favor of the American United Auto Workers union. The UAW had demanded the German union cede one of its coveted board seats following Daimler's acquisition of US-based Chrysler. Under German law all businesses incorporated in Germany must apportion their board seats evenly between labor and management. Of Daimler's 10 labor seats, 3 are assigned to officials of IG Metal and 7 to delegates elected by so-called workers councils. IG Metal officials initially expressed reluctance in giving up a board seat to the UAW. The seats are prized positions, awarded to lifelong IG Metal officials, labor lawyers or select academics.

Leaders of the United Auto Workers and the IG Metall metalworkers union met this week in Darmstadt to discuss the planned acquisition of Chrysler by Daimler. IG Metal leader Klaus Zwickel and UAW President Stephen Yokich met personally to finalize the agreement giving the UAW

a board seat.

US postal union protests privatization

The American Postal Workers Union held rallies at hundreds of post offices across the United States on May 27 to protest pending legislation in Congress that would encourage further privatization of mail delivery.

The protest came in the wake of a decision by the US Postal Service to contract out Priority Mail service to Emery Worldwide Airlines. Last year the government awarded a \$1.7 billion contract to Emery, a nonunion company, to create a network of 10 Priority Mail Processing plants along the Eastern seaboard. The APWU estimates that 1,400 post office jobs will be eliminated as a result of the action.

An official union press release argued that the post office was making a mistake in contracting priority service to Emery since union members 'could perform the work more efficiently and at less cost.'

Northwest pilots approve strike

Northwest Airline pilots have voted by a 99 percent margin in a mail ballot to authorize a strike. The 6,120 members of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), have been in contract negotiations for more than 20 months.

For a strike to be legal the National Mediation Board must first declare an impasse. The government can then declare an additional 30-day waiting period.

On May 22 ALPA, the International Association of Machinists and the Teamsters set up informational pickets at four airports to protest lack of progress in negotiations. The pickets targeted Northwest hubs in Minneapolis and Detroit as well as Los Angeles and Seattle.

More than 40,000 workers at Northwest Airlines, including pilots, machinists and flight attendants, have been in negotiations since late 1996. In 1993 the workers took major concessions when the company faced a financial crisis. Since that time the company has returned to profitability, but management has refused to grant wage increases. Northwest is demanding pilots take further concessions, calling for the establishment of a lower pay scale for certain categories of pilots.

Since late April a work-to-rule action by Northwest machinists has resulted in hundreds of cancelled or delayed flights.

Detroit visiting nurses vote for strike authorization

Registered nurses voted May 26 to authorize a strike against the Visiting Nurses Association of Southeastern Michigan if management does not back down from its demands for increased workloads. The 100 nurses, members of the Michigan Nurses Association, provide essential health care services for home-bound patients, many of whom are Medicare and Medicaid recipients, in a seven-county region surrounding Detroit. They have been working without a contract since January 1.

Management's final offer included a proposal that would increase the number of visits a nurse must make in a week, and could significantly expand the geographic area in which work must be completed. It also expands the nurses' workweek from five to seven days, and puts certain nurses on a permanent on-call basis.

French lorry drivers and bank workers strike

On May 26 French lorry drivers ended roadblocks and strikes in support of higher pay. Though smaller than last November's lorry blockades, they succeeded in closing four motorways and had partially closed ten others. The Force Ouvrière union called off the strike without achieving their stated aim of 55 francs an hour (£5.70). The employer's body agreed only to a meagre 1 percent increase in the expenses paid to drivers.

Bank workers at Credit Lyonnais staged a 24-hour strike on May 19 to protest the threat of thousands of job losses. Hundreds of workers marched through Paris to present a petition to Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, opposing the deal signed with the European Union and the French government to bail out the bank. The agreement states that 20 percent of its 1,850 branches will close and the government's stake in the bank will be reduced from 82 to 10 percent.

Russian miners end blockade

On May 25 striking Siberian miners ended a 10-day blockade of the Trans-Siberian railway. The government has verbally committed itself to paying the miners a proportion of the back pay they are owed by July 1. Some of the miners have not been paid for an entire year. By blocking the main east-west lines in Kemerovo, the capital of the mining region in Siberia, the miners cut a crucial Russian rail link. A blockade was established near the southern mining region of Rostov-on-Don and at the Arctic mining centre, Vorkuta. On May 22 President Boris Yeltsin threatened the miners with prosecution for damage to the economy, saying that they had 'gone too far.' Miners responded by demanding Yeltsin's resignation.

BBC workers vote for strike action

24-hour strike action by workers on June 4 and 9 could affect the national and local transmission of all BBC programmes on TV and radio. In opposition to an attack on conditions by the corporation, members of the broadcasting union BECTU have voted for industrial action by large majorities. BBC workers voted for action in opposition to the new salary management system, which means workers will lose seniority payments.

Management threatens to sack British care workers

Care workers in Tameside, Greater Manchester, employed in local authority retirement homes, have been on strike for nine weeks against pay cuts and attacks on working conditions. The local Labour Party-controlled authority has threatened to dismiss them.

Job Losses at Bernard Matthews

The Lincolnshire-based food company, Bernard Matthews, is withdrawing from its export operations because of the strength of the pound on international money markets. The company has suffered heavy losses and is shedding 300 jobs at its farms and poultry factories.

Greek bank workers oppose privatisation

The Greek Federation of Bank Employees Unions has called for a 24-hour nationwide strike on Monday, June 1 to protest the police raid on five workers who had been occupying the main computer room of the state-owned Ionian Bank for two weeks in the port city of Piraeus.

Police in full riot gear stormed the bank early on Sunday morning, arresting two of the occupying workers and then violently assaulted other union members picketing outside. Nearly 2,000 bank workers and supporters later staged a demonstration outside the bank, chanting anti-government slogans.

On May 15 workers began a three-week campaign of strikes, work bans and rolling stoppages across the banking sector to oppose government plans to sell the Ionian Bank, one of the country's oldest financial institutions. The sale could cost up to 3,000 jobs.

Bank workers have warned that the sale is part of the government's drive to privatise the entire banking sector in an attempt to meet the strict criteria to qualify for the European Monetary Union by 2001.

In line with EMU demands, Greece's Social Democratic government has cut public spending and slashed thousands of public sector jobs. In March it devalued the country's currency by 14 percent, sparking a round of labour unrest.

Polish miners demonstrate against job cuts

Miners, members of the Solidarity trade union, were set to demonstrate in Warsaw against plans to cut 118,000 jobs out of 240,000 from the industry in the next five years. The Polish government's aim is to make the mining industry profitable by the year 2000. Prior to the march, miners unions attempted to head off a confrontation with the government by claiming significant concessions had been made. The government has said there will be no job cuts until the year 2000, and these will be reduced to 105,000. This is virtually the same plan, only delayed by one year.



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