

# Workers struggles around the world

23 May 1998

We invite workers and others to contribute to this feature by sending information to: [editor@wsws.org](mailto:editor@wsws.org)

## **Siberian miners threaten all-Russian strike**

Protesting coal miners who have been blockading the Trans-Siberian Railway for a week to demand the payment of outstanding wages voted May 22 to launch an all-Russia strike.

Approximately 1,000 workers from the area around the town of Anshero-Sudschenk have been engaging in wildcat protests which have brought railway traffic across Russia to a near halt. Since the beginning of May miners have struck in dozens of the Siberian mines.

Governor Aman Tulejew said: "The people are so angry and suspicious of the government that it could result in a powerful explosion which they could also hear in Moscow." The governor reported that the strikers are beginning to raise political demands, including the resignation of President Boris Yeltsin. "The people are desperate and have lost all patience" he said.

Workers from adjoining regions have threatened to join the blockade, a move that would completely paralyze the railway connection between Moscow and the east of the country. In the region of Perm, in the Urals, workers blocked a road between the towns of Kungur and Solikamsk. In the northern town of Vorkuta miners barricaded the town mayor and other local politicians in their offices and decided to send a delegation of 1,000 to the government in Moscow.

Thousands of miners have been paid months and even years late. The miners union said the total owed to coal miners is \$653 million. In many cases, the coal miners have not been paid by electric companies, which are unable to collect their payments from factories and consumers.

## **French lorry drivers threaten strike**

French lorry drivers are threatening to strike during the football World Cup this summer if no satisfactory results are achieved in talks with the employers by May 26. The drivers are demanding more pay and a reorganization of working times. The settlement arrived at following a six-day strike in the autumn of 1997 has been ignored by the employers. At that time the lorry drivers disrupted traffic for six days with street blockades throughout France. Last weekend the smallest of the three major trade union federations, the Force Ouvrière, decided to organize protest actions for the last week of May and the beginning of June.

## **Negotiation in the east German building industry in final phase**

Wage negotiations in the east German building industry have reached their final phase in Potsdam. Chief arbitrator is the Christian Democratic politician Heiner Geissler. Until now the employers have rejected the trade unions' demand for the adoption of the west German standard which would amount to a 1.5 percent increase in wages for the 336,000 building workers in the former East Germany. According to the unions involved, the industrial truce with management will expire on the evening of May 21, after which strikes are possible.

## **Rail workers to receive 1.5 percent more wages**

In order to avoid a strike the German Railway Board and the railway workers union (GdED) announced a settlement May 18. In June around 161,000 railway workers will be given a 1.5 percent wage increase. The wages and salaries of the 78,000 east German railway workers are to rise

by one percentage point, bringing them to 87 percent of the pay rate of their colleagues in the west. The GdED went into the negotiations with a series of demands amounting to a 5 percent increase. The employers offered half of 1 percent. The GdED then threatened limited strike action. At the end of April the employers declared the negotiations had collapsed and called for arbitration for the first time since the privatization of the former publicly-owned rail company.

## **Spanish olive workers strike**

Workers in the olive industry held a one-day strike May 14 in protest against European Union plans to cut olive production. Hundreds of towns and villages throughout central and southern Spain, the main olive growing region, were the focus of the dispute. Spain is the largest olive oil producer in the world and farmers have predicted that the EU proposals will lead to many job losses. The EU also plans to reduce production of olive oil in France, Greece, Italy and Portugal.

## **British textile layoffs**

The clothing company Burberrys is to close factories at Littleport in Cambridgeshire, and Whitby in North Yorkshire. The firm is also shedding 100 jobs at its factory in Hackney, East London. The impact of the economic crisis in the Far East has been cited as the reason for the job losses.

The Taiwanese company Lite on Technology is closing two of its three computer screen production lines at its Mossend Scottish factory. Two-thirds of its 350-member work force are to be made redundant. The announcement follows the postponement of the opening of the semiconductor plant in Fife (central Scotland) by Hyundai, and the announcement of the closure of Mitsubishi television factory at Haddington, East Lothian, Scotland. All blame the turmoil and crisis in South East Asia.

The financial arm of BAT industries, British American Financial Services (BAFS), is to shed 1,600 jobs when it carries out its de-merger from the tobacco industry and merges with the insurance group, Zurich, later this year. The 1,600 job losses represent 10 percent of the BAT and BAFS British work force of 16,000. Most of the jobs will be lost at Eagle Star, the general insurance and pension section of BAT. When the merger was announced last September annual savings of \$250 million were mooted. However, Zurich's chief executive Rolf Huppi has now stated that the job cuts will mean savings of an estimated \$400 million. As the job cuts were announced it was revealed that one of Zurich's management board was paid over \$1.6 million last year.

## **Dutch bank threatens Indonesian closings**

The Dutch bank ABN Amro has warned that it may shut all 18 of its branches in Indonesia as the economic and political crisis develops. Analysts for the bank have pointed out that the situation could also jeopardize the Indonesian coffee crop.

## **Greek unions agree to wage pact**

The Greek trade unions have signed a two-year pay deal with the employers federation accepting wage rises of 4.5 percent this year and 2.8 percent next year. Automatic increases tied to inflation would not be paid until the year 2000. The agreement's stated aim is to keep within the government's target of 2.9 percent. This pact follows the Socialist (Social Democratic) government's attack on public sector workers' pay rates. The

government has threatened to sack any manager who awards a higher settlement than a 2.5 percent increase. These limits are part of the plan to meet the Maastricht criteria for the year 2001. As part of this target 11 state enterprises are to be sold to the private sector beginning in June. The collaboration of the Socialist government and the trade unions follows growing calls from workers for a general strike to halt the decline in living standards.

#### **French assembly votes for 35-hour week**

On May 19 the French National assembly voted to implement a 35-hour workweek starting in the year 2000. Despite opposition from the rightist parties in France and the employers' federation, CNPF, the Jospin's Socialist Party government secured this second stage of legislation. The measure will provide subsidies and protection to private firms who take on more workers. The 35-hour week proposal, which Jospin said would aid the unemployed, was the central axis of Jospin's election victory last year. The working week will be reduced from 39 to 35, but workers will have no protection against pay loss. Jospin's bill also exempted 45 public sector firms from the law. Employers' initial opposition has become more muted as they begin to see the potential for vast productivity increases, flexibility and pay cuts.

#### **French railway workers hold one-day strike**

On May 13 French railway workers staged a 24-hour strike disrupting services throughout the country. The action was a warning strike to prepare for pay negotiations. Unions expect the Socialist government to enforce wage restraint.

Strikes by three French pilots' unions are planned May 24-25 against Air France plans to cut wages. The union's demands are to limit pilots to four flights a day and to end the lower pay scale for pilots introduced in June 1997. The pilots say that poor working conditions are now affecting the safety and quality of Air France flights.

#### **Australian coal miners face sackings**

Rio Tinto has announced a "business improvement" plan that includes the sacking of 175 miners from its Hunter Valley No. 1 open cut mine, inland from the Australian steel city of Newcastle.

Its announcement follows a secret ballot last week in which miners overwhelming rejected a move to individual contracts. The contracts would have removed restrictions on management's power to hire and fire, and would have introduced greater flexibility in directing labor, in return for pay increases. Management now intends to proceed under the Howard government's Workplace Relations Act, which allows working conditions to be stripped back.

Following the ballot result, mining union Senior Vice President Tony Maher called on the company to negotiate a "compromise deal" through the union to deliver the company "genuine reform." The union has made known that it will accept the job cuts, provided they are carried out on the basis of seniority.

Hunter Valley No. 1 was the site of protracted strikes called by the mining union against individual contracts and for a new Enterprise Agreement. The agreement would deliver cuts in manning and working conditions, but through consultation with the union.

#### **West Australian nurses strike for pay**

Nurses from all public hospitals in Western Australia (WA) went on strike for 48 hours and picketed major hospitals this week. They demanded that the state Liberal government grant a 13 percent wage increase over two years and employ an extra 200 nurses.

The strike, part of a three-month campaign, was called when WA state premier Richard Court refused to budge on the government's offer of 6 percent over the same period. The premier rejected calls by the nurses that their pay increase be funded from the \$24 million budget surplus just posted by the government.

WA nurses are the worst paid on the Australian mainland. A graduate recruit receives only \$563.80 per week, compared to \$628.30 in New

South Wales and \$646.49 in South Australia.

The strike forced the cancellation of all elective surgery, but emergency services were maintained. The nurses have threatened industrial bans, rolling stoppages and further strike action if their demands are not met.

#### **South African unions collaborate in job cuts**

Thousands more jobs are threatened in the South African steel industry. Iscore, one of the country's biggest steel producers, has announced a major rationalization that could result in the closure of its operations in Vanderbijlpark, leading to the axing of 7,000 jobs over two years. The company board was to meet this week to decide on the closure of a mill and blast furnace at the Vanderbijlpark operation, a move that would immediately wipe out at least 400 jobs.

Iscore managing director Hans Smith said the unions had been involved in all the discussions. The unions, including the National Union of Metalworkers, which represents most steel workers, have participated in "investigating teams" that have overseen restructuring in the last four years.

In that time the company has slashed its work force from more than 40,000 to 23,000. Only last year Iscore closed its Pretoria plants, destroying 1,200 jobs.

Smith said the restructuring had the backing of the ANC government of Nelson Mandela. "The government has demanded that the steel industry become internationally competitive," he said.

#### **South Korean protests hit mass layoffs**

Hyundai Motor Company, South Korea's largest carmaker, announced May 20 that it planned to lay off more than 8,000 workers, about one-fifth of its work force. Spokesman for the company said the layoffs, which are to take effect in June, are needed to retain Hyundai's competitiveness. Union leaders responded by saying workers might strike to oppose the plan.

An estimated 6,000 workers attended rallies in Seoul and three provincial capitals last weekend protesting against company layoffs and rocketing unemployment.

The rallies, called by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), were canceled in seven other centers, including the industrial city of Ulsan and the nation's second largest city, Pusan. KCTU spokesmen blamed rain for calling off rallies but the cancellations followed a government appeal for "labor restraint," and repeated warnings that mass demonstrations could turn violent and scare away foreign investment. Fearing a repeat of antigovernment clashes that took place on May Day, President Kim Dae Jung's government deployed a 6,600-strong police cordon around central Seoul to prevent students from joining the rally.

KCTU leaders addressing the rallies condemned sackings and called on the government to take measures against rising unemployment. But major companies are downsizing their work forces under an accord struck in February between the unions, business and the government, effectively ending "lifetime employment."

Unemployment now officially stands at 1.5 million, almost double the level of last December. Union sources put the figure closer to 3 million. Unemployment will rise dramatically in the coming months as the government closes down major industries in line with demands of the International Monetary Fund.

#### **Union officials block strikes against Sri Lankan government**

Last month postal workers, nurses, railway workers, bank employees and electricity board workers agitated for industrial action against the Peoples Alliance (PA) government and the employers. This followed the 500,000-strong plantation workers strike last February that paralyzed wide sectors of the economy from the harvesting of tealeaves and coconuts, to the tapping of rubber trees for latex, to the export of finished products.

On May 3, *The Sunday Times* editorial stated: "May Day this year was celebrated in the midst of an agonizing postal crisis that has gone on for

nearly two months, hospital go slows and in the backdrop of a threat of a general strike."

Clearly aware of the political challenge that the agitation for industrial action poses to the PA regime and profit system it defends, the trade union leaders, mainly composed of Samasamaja (LSSP), Stalinist and Nava Samasamaja party members, did everything to undermine and demoralize the workers. For example, while the postal and telecommunication workers formulated 17 demands to the PA regime, including opposition to its plans to privatize the postal service, the union leaders argued that privatization is unavoidable in a market economy. The union bureaucracy countered by demanding the replacement of the current head of the postal service with a sympathetic executive during the transition to a private company.

During the struggle hundreds of full-time and temporary workers were victimized, but the union leaders called off all action without any guarantee of the reinstatement of these workers.

A similar fate came to the nurses struggle. At first officials from the United Nurses Union contained the struggle to a campaign of writing sick notes, and then promised an islandwide strike if the employers did not agree to the workers' 15 demands. But at the end of the sick note campaign the union called off any strike action, claiming that the government had agreed to three of its demands.

The railway drivers' agitation ended no differently. The union promised strike action beginning April 7, but without even consulting the workers it called it off after the government refused to negotiate.

The Bank Employees Union, which initially called for a 60 percent pay increase, settled for a 20 percent increase without any of the other main demands being met.

The workers of the Electricity Board, whose strike left the entire country without power for three days in 1996, still face the threat of privatization. Their union called a day of picketing and announced it would take "stern action" if the government did not withdraw its privatization plan. No action has been taken.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**