

Workers struggles around the world

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The Americas

Philadelphia transit workers strike

Nearly 5,500 workers struck city and suburban transit divisions in Philadelphia June 1, bringing the fourth largest US mass transit system to a halt. The strike was provoked by a wide range of economic and non-economic issues, ranging from work rules and the use of part-timers to pay scales and health benefits. The workers' contract expired March 15. The strike is affecting 435,000 passengers who ride city buses, trolley and subway-elevated trains as well as some suburban bus lines.

On June 4, leaders of Transport Workers Union Local 234 offered to end the strike if management agreed to binding arbitration. Officials from the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA) rejected the offer. SEPTA management is demanding the authority to shut down operations and subcontract work and services. One plan outlined in a management study published last spring indicates that SEPTA intends to open public bus service to competition from private companies and seeks to privatize 14.2 percent of the work force each year.

When the TWU last struck, in 1995, the walkout lasted more than two weeks.

Auto workers strike GM metal fabricating plant

Workers at a key General Motors metal fabricating plant in Flint, Michigan walked off the job Friday morning in a strike which could have the ripple affect of halting production of GM's profitable full-size pickup trucks and sports-utility vehicles and forcing the closure of 18 plants throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico in two weeks due to a lack of parts. The 3,400 striking workers, members of United Auto Workers Local 659, are protesting the lack of hiring, speed-up, health and safety grievances and the outsourcing of jobs. UAW officials have accused GM of reneging on its end of the bargain to invest \$300 million in Flint stamping operations after the union collaborated with management to increase productivity.

Conditions in the auto plants have become intolerable, with older workers—the average age at the Flint metal fabricating plant is 50 years old—being driven to increase output. This has resulted in an increase in heart attacks and injuries.

In the late 1970s GM employed 90,000 auto workers in Flint, the birthplace both of the giant auto maker and the UAW. Today, fewer than 36,000 UAW workers are still working.

Late Thursday another 5,000 workers at GM's Delphi Automotive Systems' Flint East plant voted to strike June 11.

Strike halts highway projects across Michigan

Four thousand heavy equipment operators struck June 4, four days after the expiration of their contract with the Road Builders Association of Michigan. The strike by members of Local 234 of the International Union of Operating Engineers, who work on 75 percent of state's highway projects, halted work during one of the busiest road construction seasons on record in Michigan. The workers, who operate cranes, pavers, earth movers and most other heavy machinery used in road construction, are angry over management's wage offer and other contract issues. A federal mediator has been called in but talks are not likely to resume until next week.

Steel company hiring strikebreakers

New York-based Niagara Corporation said it began hiring permanent workers this week to replace striking employees at its LaSalle Steel plant in Hammond, Indiana. Some 275 workers have been on strike since May 18 at the steel processing plant. Over the last decade and half thousands of workers have lost their jobs at area mills owned by US Steel, Inland, LTV and other companies without any significant opposition from the United Steel Workers of America union.

Huffy Bicycle demand \$4 an hour wage cut

Management at Huffy Corporation's Celina, Ohio plant told their 1,000 employees in late May that they had to work for as little as \$6.10 an hour with no health benefits and no pension plan or the company would shut the plant. Workers took a 20 percent wage cut to \$10.00 an hour three years ago to keep the company from shifting production to a nonunion plant in Missouri. Employees denounced the ultimatum and refused to vote on it. A group of workers staged a protest outside of the plant. In response, the Ohio-based company announced that it would shut the world's largest bike factory by next year and that its decision was "irreversible."

The company, which has had a 40-year presence in southern Ohio, blamed global competition and announced that it would move production to the Missouri plant and increase its imports from facilities in Asia and Mexico. While the company made \$10 million profit last year, its wage offer is only 95 cents above the federal minimum wage and less than some

hourly workers make at McDonald's restaurants.

The workers' union, the United Steel Workers of America, made no announcements of plans to fight the shutdown. Instead a USWA spokesman made a typically chauvinist statement blaming politicians for not doing anything to stop Asian manufacturers from taking away "American jobs."

Cheating on coal-dust tests widespread in US mines

A expose in the *Louisville Courier Journal* late last month revealed that coal operators regularly falsify test results and that the responsible federal government agency, the Mine Safety and Health Administration, has ignored the obviously false samples for more than 20 years. Every year 1,500 coal miners die of Black Lung disease, a debilitating ailment which blocks respiration with scars and mucus and eventually causes workers to die of suffocation.

In 1969, after years of struggle by coal miners, the US Congress placed limits on the amount of airborne dust in mines and ordered operators to take periodic tests. The laws led to a two-thirds reduction in Black Lung cases. However, the year-long investigation by the Kentucky newspaper found widespread evidence of cheating, which the *Louisville Courier Journal* says has prevented the outright elimination of the disease.

The newspaper reported that coal operators regularly order miners to shut off their dust monitors in high-dust areas or to take samples in clean air away from working areas. While some miners are bullied by managers, others are afraid that if a mine is cited for poor safety conditions, the operator will shut it down, rather than spend the necessary money to improve conditions. In Kentucky, legislators—at the urging of Governor Paul Patton, a former coal operator—passed a workers compensation law in 1996 that made it tougher for Black Lung victims to qualify for benefits. The law cut insurance premiums of some coal companies in half.

Trinidadian workers continue strike

One thousand workers at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad are continuing their strike against low pay. The workers, members of the Oilfields Workers trade union, began their strike on March 31.

Europe

Police attack Greek bank workers

Police savagely attacked workers at the state-owned Ionia Bank on June 1 and forcibly removed workers who were occupying the bank's main computer center. As news of the attack spread, thousands of workers gathered and chanted anti-government slogans. The Pan-Hellenic Socialist Party government has signaled its intention to use state violence to ensure workers defending their living standards do not threaten its privatization program.

Last week bank workers defied a court ruling and continued their two-week strike. A three-member tribunal deemed the strike illegal and ordered fines of up to \$US1,250 a day. But the workers set up pickets

outside the bank's main computer center in the port city of Piraeus, the site of another violent police raid late last month to end a workers' occupation.

The bank's privatization is part of the cost-cutting package unveiled by the government in March, to slash public spending to meet the strict criteria for entry into the European Monetary Union by 2001.

It is expected that the bank workers union will agree to 51% of the bank being transferred to private ownership in return for a two-year agreement that protects working conditions and the jobs of the 4,200 workers.

One day strike at British Broadcasting Corporation

Television and Radio programs were severely affected as members of the broadcasting union BECTU struck for 24 hours June 3. Technical staff face widespread changes in working conditions and job security through changes to the structure of the BBC. BBC management has told BECTU that picketing the cricket test match at Edgbaston would be illegal. The BBC has also threatened to use a feed from Rupert Murdoch's Sky Television and to employ freelance staff.

London Underground workers vote to strike

Members of the transport union RMT working on the London Underground subway system have voted 84% in favour of strike action. Workers are protesting the threat to their jobs, working conditions and pension rights as a result of the move towards privatisation of whole sectors of the underground system. Railway maintenance staff and members of the RMT have voted to take strike action in nine maintenance companies over pay and working conditions

English fire fighters to protest

Fire fighters in the county of Essex, southwest England, are to take industrial action on June 8 following a strike ballot in opposition to cuts in their budget. The dispute will last four hours and military "Green Goddesses" (army vehicles) are being prepared for use to replace fire engines. The fire-fighters, members of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), are protesting at the proposal of the Essex Fire Authority to cut more than £1m from the fire departments budget. An FBU spokesman said, "The prospect of strike action is now a reality unless the Essex Fire Authority comes to its senses and uses some of its £28m reserves to settle this dispute."

British Steel plans to sack thousands

British Steel, the largest steel producer in Britain is in the process of laying off 2,000 workers. It is planning to shed thousands more over the next three years. The company issued a statement on May 31 saying that it saw "a significant level of job reductions" of its global work force of 50,300. The firm employs 40,000 workers in Britain. Analysts have

estimated that around 12,500 jobs will go by March 2001. This cost cutting could increase British Steels profits by £730m by the same year. A British Steel spokesman said, "We have not put any pegs in the ground in terms of how many job cuts there will be."

Asia-Pacific

Kia workers strike in South Korea

South Korean workers employed by Kia Motors launched an indefinite strike on June 1 over the company's non-payment of wages on top of a 50 percent wage cut and its failure to abide by previous union-management agreements.

The company is part of the Kia Group, which defaulted on debts of more than \$US8.5 billion in July 1997. Ford and Mazda, which are considering a takeover of Kia Motors, are insisting on far reaching changes in staffing policies before investing.

About 14,000 employees went to strike after fellow worker 37-year-old Song In Doh attempted to commit suicide by setting himself on fire. He reportedly spoke of betrayal by the company and financial difficulties after receiving his pay.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) announced on Sunday that a second round of nationwide industrial action over widespread layoffs would be postponed until after president Kim Dae Jung returned from the US. KCTU leaders met with government officials in late night talks on Monday over their participation in a tripartite committee with big business and government representatives.

Jobs axed by Cathay Pacific

Hong Kong's biggest airline, Cathay Pacific Airways, announced this week that it will axe 1,000 jobs, about 7 percent of its workforce. The sackings come after continuous public denials by the company that it planned to shed any more labour after laying off 870 workers at the beginning of the year.

Less than three weeks ago, on May 13, following the company's annual general meeting, Cathay chairman Peter Sutch said: "The suggestion that we plan to cut a further 1,000 jobs has simply no basis in truth."

The sackings follow the company's first net loss since it was founded more than 50 years ago. A spokesman said the company aims to cut unit costs by 13 percent this year. He said the job losses "may be achieved through attrition"—the non-replacement of workers who retire or leave — but did not rule out direct sackings.

Australian Paper mill to close

Amcor, Australia's largest paper producer, has announced the closure of its Australian Paper (AP) pulp mill in Burnie, Tasmania, at the cost of 150 jobs, with hundreds more to be affected in the already depressed area. The closure will hit the local timber industry, which supplies woodchip to the mill.

Jobs are also on the line at Amcor's nearby Wesley Vale plant. With a

work force of 300, Wesley Vale depends on the Burnie plant for the raw material for its output of coated copy paper.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, which covers the bulk of the AP workers as well as 600 more members working in Amcor plants throughout the country, has threatened to call a national strike if the closure goes ahead.

However, in 1992 the AMWU, along with every other union, isolated a protracted strike by Burnie workers against company restructuring that eliminated hundreds of jobs, destroyed hard-won conditions and imposed speed-up.

Union officials toured the plants nationally telling workers not to take industrial action, restricting workers to financial support via a strike fund controlled by the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

Amcor plans to import pulp from Indonesia. The Burnie closure is part of a worldwide restructuring. In the first six months of this financial year the company had already eliminated 1,500 jobs from the 24,000-strong work force it employs in 300 locations around the globe.

Tasmanian nurses impose bans

Nurses in Tasmania, members of the Australian Nursing Federation, began a campaign of work bans last week when the state government rejected their demands for an 11 percent wage raise spread over three years.

Liberal government health minister Peter McKay offered pay increases totaling 5.5 percent over 34 months conditional on the nurses supporting cost-cutting measures.

Bans are in place at three of the state's major hospitals, Burnie's North West General, the Royal Hobart Hospital and Launceston General Hospital. The campaign includes rolling theatre stoppages and bans on cleaning beds post-discharge, performing non-nursing duties, answering phones and carrying out relief duties.

Union officials have already signaled that they are willing to discuss trade-offs and are "anxious to meet with the government". ANF state secretary Helen Gray said the union had accepted "efficiencies" in the past. If the government could identify other savings, the "union would be happy to consider them."

Recent media reports have revealed that \$25 million has been slashed from Tasmanian health services this financial year and that the government is looking for further cuts totaling \$32 million.

New South Wales public sector workers demand stoppage

Public sector workers are demanding industrial action against the New South Wales state Labor Party government of Bob Carr, because the government is refusing to honour an agreement made last year granting a 16 percent wage increase over three years.

Two hundred workers meeting in the steel city of Wollongong, ahead of statewide stopwork meetings scheduled for June 12, condemned the government for "ratting on" the agreement by reducing the installment payments due in July and next January.

Union leaders had trouble dissuading the workers from immediately taking industrial action and closing down government offices. Public Sector Association state secretary Maurie O'Sullivan pleaded that the Labor government was in "dire straits financially" and that Premier Carr "had been misled by bad advisers."

Middle East

Iran oil workers threaten to strike

Workers employed in Iranian oil refineries in Abadan, Bandar Abbas, Bandar Mahshar and Masjed Suleiman have issued a one month notice to the Ali Khamenei government that they will take industrial action, including strikes, if their wage claims are not met.

They are demanding wage rises to keep pace with inflation and recognition of the right to collective bargaining. Oil workers in Tehran have signaled their support for the campaign.

Strikes and demonstrations demanding pay increases, condemning price rises and opposing political repression have erupted in many regions across the country. Earlier this month the government called a special session of the Supreme National Security Council and assigned the Ministry of Intelligence and the Guards Corps the task of stamping out the growing unrest.



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