

Workers struggles around the world

13 June 1998

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Hope dims for worker buried in grain elevator blast

The search for a missing worker at the site of a grain elevator explosion in Haysville, Kansas, near Wichita, is continuing. Rescue workers are searching in a tunnel at the south end of the heavily damaged facility. A fire in a grain bin briefly halted the search. One person remains unaccounted for after the June 8 blast. At least five people were killed. Hope is waning that the sixth might still be alive.

The powerful explosion blew out both ends of the elevator. The blast tore holes the size of a house in the 165-foot headhouse, the central portion of the complex which contains the main conveyer system and control center.

While rescue efforts continued, investigators from the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the Agriculture Department interviewed survivors and inspected the shattered facility, which had been cited twice for excessive grain dust. Grain dust can be extremely dangerous. "With the right mixture of dust in the air it can be just as explosive as dynamite," said Tom Marple, Kansas director of OSHA.

A funeral was held in Wichita Thursday for 40-year-old Jose Duarte, the first of the five victims laid to rest. Five injured workers remain hospitalized.

Nabisco cutting 3,100 jobs

In a continuation of the trend of corporate downsizing, Nabisco announced plans to eliminate 3,100 jobs as part of a cost-cutting drive. The planned cuts represent about 6 percent of the company's 52,400 workers. The cuts include the closure of facilities in the United States, Brazil and Argentina. As part of its restructuring, Nabisco plans to increase spending on marketing by 30 percent.

Aeromexico Strike Ends

Flight attendants for Mexico's largest airline formally ended a six-day strike June 13. They had never stopped working, however, because the government took over the airline's operations when the strike began and compelled them to stay on the job.

The 1,033 unionized flight attendants went on strike a week ago over salaries, work hours, benefits and the size of flight crews. However the

government immediately seized control of AeroMexico and ordered the flight attendants to keep working. Federal authorities utilized a provision in Mexico's constitution allowing the government to take over companies deemed vital to the national interest.

Alejandra Barrales, general secretary of the flight attendants union, said the company agreed to the strikers' major demands. These included an 18.3 percent raise, one additional flight attendant on each flight, extra pay for night work and the beginnings of a retirement plan.

Wheland strikers vote down contract offer

Striking workers at Wheland Foundry in Chattanooga, Tennessee, one of the largest independent auto parts makers in the US, voted down a concessionary offer by management and continued their nearly six-week-old walkout. The vote was by a three-to-one margin. The offer had been previously rejected by union negotiators.

Nearly 1,300 hourly workers struck when their contract expired May 3. Workers are fighting proposals by management that would limit overtime. They also rejected management's 3 percent wage offer as inadequate.

Wheland has continued production using nonunion strikebreakers. The plant, which manufactures brake castings, has been staffed by 700 temporary workers. Management claims it is producing at 70 percent of capacity. Wheland's parts are used in more than half of all US-made cars and more than 70 percent of the country's light-duty trucks.

NEA and AFT to vote on merger

Leaders of the two largest teachers unions in the United States are considering a merger in an attempt to shore up their organizations. The National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, with a combined membership of more than 3 million, are set to approve unification this summer. The crucial test comes July 5, when more than 10,000 delegates to the NEA's annual convention cast ballots.

There is substantial opposition within the NEA leadership to the proposed merger. Two-thirds of the NEA delegates must approve the unification, and some large state affiliates are opposed. NEA President Bob Chase strongly supports the unification and is lobbying delegates in the run-up to the convention.

The NEA is not currently affiliated to the AFL-CIO. A merger would make the new union the largest in the labor federation, surpassing the Teamsters. Under guidelines being drawn up for the merger, it would be left up to individual state and local bodies whether or not to affiliate to the AFL-CIO.

The leadership of both organizations are stressing what they call a "new unionism" which, they say, puts academic quality and school improvement on the same level as pay, benefits and job security. They

have been working jointly on teacher quality, discipline and safety. In practice this means the sacrificing of pay and working conditions to appease the cost-cutting drive of school boards and state legislatures.

KLM pilots pledge support to Northwest pilots

Pilots at KLM Royal Dutch Airlines have vowed to support the Northwest Airlines pilots if they strike later this summer. KLM's pilots union says its members will not operate any Northwest routes, make extra flights or fly larger planes on existing routes if the Northwest pilots strike.

Northwest pilots made similar pledges when KLM pilots threatened to strike in 1995 and 1997. The KLM pilots union also agreed to spend 1 million guilders, or about \$400,000, to set up a Northwest pilots strike center in Amsterdam.

Northwest is in contract talks with all six of its unions. The airline's workers took large concessions in 1993 when the company faced a financial crisis. Now, with the company making large profits, management is demanding further concessions.

Northwest has proposed a five-year contract linking its pilot pay to average pilot salaries at the three largest airlines. Management also wants to expand the current two-tier wage system. The Air Line Pilots Association, which voted last month to authorize a strike, rejected the proposal and calls for pay increases totaling 27 percent over five years.

McDonald's workers want union

Two young workers who led the first strike in the United States against a McDonald's facility have asked the National Labor Relations Board to allow a unionization vote at the suburban Cleveland, Ohio restaurant.

The workers submitted 21 union authorization cards to the NLRB, enough to force a representation election among the Macedonia, Ohio restaurant's 40 nonmanagement employees. The workers are seeking representation by the Teamsters.

About 20 restaurant employees, nearly all of them high school or college students, went on strike in April. They cited numerous grievances such as swearing by supervisors and pay based on favoritism. The five-day walkout ended when managers promised to undergo human relations training and address other issues. Workers allege nothing has changed since the strike. The NLRB scheduled a June 11 hearing on the workers' request.

Workers continue strike at Tijuana Maquiladora

In what may be the first legal strike ever at a Mexican Maquiladora plant by an independent union, workers are continuing a walkout that began May 22 against the Han Young chassis factory. Workers have defied Mexican police and company thugs to continue their walkout, which has drawn international attention.

Han Young is the sole supplier of chassis for the giant Hyundai complex in Tijuana. The walkout provoked outrage from the Mexican establishment. The governor of Baja California declared the strike the work of "foreign unions" seeking to discourage investment in Mexico.

After initially tolerating the strike, Mexican authorities ordered a

crackdown on June 3. Police tore down strike banners and escorted strikebreakers into the plant. Arrest warrants were issued for Enrique Hernandez, organizer of the October 6 Union for Community Labor Defense, the independent Han Young union, and for Jose Penaflor, the union attorney. In the wake of the attack the workers have issued an international call for support.

Workers had been attempting to organize a union independent of the state controlled official union organization for more than one year. Wages at the factory average about \$8 per day and the plant has a high accident rate. The company fired 12 supporters of the independent union this spring.

British track maintenance workers threaten strike

Track repair workers in Britain are threatening to strike for 11 days in response to take-away demands by management. Union officials say workers will stop maintaining tracks for four days beginning June 19, then for seven more days beginning June 29.

About 9,000 of the nation's 15,000 railroad maintenance workers are members of the Rail Maritime and Transport Union. Management is making contingency plans to operate with nonunion workers. The union threatened to walk off the job at nine engineering companies that work as contractors to maintain Railtrack's infrastructure.

The engineering companies want concessions from workers in a new deal that would raise basic pay but force drastic changes in work rules. While basic rates of pay might rise by as much as 20 percent under proposals being made by some of the engineering companies, a typical rail worker might see his actual weekly pay fall to 260 pounds (\$424) per week from 300 pounds (\$490) per week because of reduced overtime.

Air France workers return

Flights are returning to normal following the end Wednesday of a 10-day strike by members of the main pilots union, the SNPL. Three smaller pilots unions, representing 30 percent of flight crews who were also on strike, called off their action on Thursday, but have so far refused to sign up to the agreement struck in secret negotiations between the Air France management and the SNPL.

The agreement freezes wage scales for seven years and introduces a "junior pilots" pay scale, penalizing newly qualified pilots. Negotiations will continue regarding the offer of shares in a partially privatized Air France in exchange for accepting further pay cuts.

The company aims to make savings of 500 million francs a year from the pilots' wage bill by these measures. Since 1993 Air France has imposed stringent cuts affecting all grades, in order to improve "competitiveness" and prepare for eventual privatization. The strike is reported to have cost Air France 1.5 billion francs.

Minister of Transport Jean-Claude Gaysott and Minister of Economics Dominique Strauss-Kahn have reaffirmed that the Socialist Party coalition government is pressing ahead with the privatization of the national airline. In September approximately 20 percent of the company will be sold off to private investors.

Philippine pilots reject order to return to work

Striking pilots at Philippine Airlines have defied a government ultimatum to return to work following mass firings carried out by management. Philippine Airlines fired almost all of its 600 pilots June 7 after they then defied an order to end their strike. The airline, the country's largest, said some former pilots now in management will used as replacements.

Management said it would rescind its firings if pilots would agree to return by the government's Tuesday June 9 deadline. However not one pilot broke ranks. The pilots struck June 5 to protest a new company policy ordering pilots to retire after 20 years of service or 20,000 hours of flight time, regardless of age. The policy would affect about 200 pilots.

Over the past four years Philippine Airlines has incurred annual losses ranging from \$11.3 million to \$62.5 million, in part because of large debts, an aging fleet and Asia's currency crisis. The strike forced a spate of cancellations on international and domestic flights, leaving hundreds of passengers stranded.

On June 6 airline management told striking pilots that their walkout was illegal. It fired all 29 officers of the union, the 620-member Airline Pilots Association of the Philippines, and warned that the rank and file would be fired if they did not return to work by noon June 7.

Indonesian workers stage protest

Police halted a six-mile-long march by striking factory workers Monday, setting off a spate of stone throwing in Indonesia's biggest protest since new Indonesian President B.J. Habibie eased restrictions on labor. At least five police and three protesters were hospitalized as a result of violence during the march in Surabaya, about 400 miles east of Jakarta.

Police later let the 10,000 protesters hold a rally outside the legislature in Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city. Feeling the effects of Indonesia's worst economic crisis in 30 years, the workers went on strike a week ago to demand higher salaries.

The government said Habibie planned to release 16 more political prisoners on Thursday, bringing to 20 the number freed since Suharto stepped down May 21.

Israeli teacher strike shuts schools

Teachers across Israel struck June 7, shutting down most schools. The walkout affected more than 1 million students. The one-day strike by members of the Histadrut labor federation was aimed at protesting changes in pension plans and planned cutbacks in staff. The walkout affected all grade levels, from kindergarten through college. Last December a nationwide strike by public employees, including teachers, paralyzed much of Israel for five days.



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