

Workers' struggles around the world – 11 July 1998

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South African steel strike

South African steel and engineering workers in KwaZulu-Natal went on strike Tuesday for a 14 percent wage claim. The Steel and Engineering Industrial Federation (SEIFSA) has only offered a pay rise of 5.5 percent.

All 600 workers at Somta Tools in Pietermaritzburg joined the strike, but stayed in the factory to protest the employers' pay offer. The strike is expected to spread to other provinces if the employers continue to refuse to budge on their offer.

Meanwhile, despite planned nationwide demonstrations by workers from steel plants in Durban, Newcastle, Vereeniging, Vanderbilpark, Dunswart and Pretoria, the giant steel producer Iscor retrenched over 6,000 workers at its Vanderbilpark complex. Jobs are being lost in the industry at the rate of industry of 1,000 a month.

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The Americas

Banana workers strike in Colombia

Thousands of workers in Colombia's main banana growing region have gone on strike to demand a pay increase of 25 percent. Over 300 banana plantations in the northwestern Uraba region are affected.

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Workfare to spread to Canadian private sector

The Ontario government has decided to allow private sector companies

to use workfare participants. Work for welfare will be extended to for-profit employers later this year, Social Services Tory Minister Janet Ecker said Wednesday.

Until now, the province's workfare program has involved various training programs and community work placements at municipal and nonprofit organizations. The leaders of the Ontario Federation of Labor, who last year called off escalating strikes and confrontations with Tory Premier Mike Harris, said employers would use welfare recipients as cheap labor to replace their current workers.

In addition, some of the 126,000 Ontario teachers who struck against Harris's so-called "education reform" Bill 160 last November, in what was the largest teachers strike in North American history, are considering taking strike action again.

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United Parcel Service reneges on promise to create full-time jobs

The Teamsters union, which struck against UPS last August, has accused the company of breaking its promise to create 2,000 full-time jobs this year. UPS spokesmen confirmed Thursday that the company notified the union that it will not add the jobs this year, because package volume had not rebounded completely from last summer's 15-day strike.

In the current contract, UPS agreed to create 10,000 full-time jobs--2,000 in 1998 and each of the following four years--if there were no layoffs due to decreased package volume.

While UPS officials blamed the layoffs on lower volume, a Teamsters spokesman said they are the result of a "deliberate policy to have more supervisors to deliver packages, to force members to work through breaks and to hold packages for residential delivery that normally would be delivered the next day for several days until the truck is full and can make one profitable delivery. If you hold onto the packages until you fill the trucks, you need fewer delivery drivers."

In addition to job cutbacks the company is forcing UPS workers to handle more volume and speed up their output. These conditions are the product of the so-called victory declared by Teamsters officials after last year's strike. The union, which is bound by the national contract not to strike, said it would do little more than organize nationwide protest rallies on July 31.

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Northwest Airlines talks end

Two days of mediated contract talks between Northwest Airlines and its pilots union ended Thursday with no movement by either side and the Air Line Pilots Association pushing for an impasse to be declared.

Only the National Mediation Board can declare an impasse in the talks, which would set into motion a 30-day cooling-off period required before pilots could strike. No further talks were scheduled.

"It is not in the best interests of the company or the passengers or any of our employees to have a strike," said spokeswoman Marta Laughlin.

The pilots union rejected Northwest's proposal for binding arbitration to settle the dispute. Union negotiators also rejected a wage proposal by Northwest last week. ALPA and Northwest have been in contract

negotiations since August 1996, with pay, pensions, job protection and work rules unresolved.

Northwest's other five unions also have open contracts. The International Association of Machinists votes on a tentative contract agreement with Northwest later this month.

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Pilot hours affect schedules, says union

Hundreds of flights a day could be canceled this summer as pilots refuse to work overtime to make up for the lack of hiring in the industry. As many as 500 American Airlines flights could be affected if pilots reject voluntary overtime, said Gregg Overman, spokesman for the Allied Pilots Association, which represents the 9,000 pilots at the airline.

US Airways pilots also have complained about "crisis" scheduling, said Roy Freundlich, spokesman for the US Airways unit of the Air Line Pilots Association. "The schedule becomes disjointed because they don't have crews. When pilots are called in on days off, it creates a lot of angry pilots," he said. Last weekend, US Airways canceled 200 flights because of crew shortages, he said. The airline has about 4,000 scheduled flights a day.

American Airlines pilots are negotiating a contract modification and complain that the company is giving up flights to partner airlines, such as Canadian Airlines. John Hotard, spokesman for Fort Worth, Texas-based American Airlines, said the airline had to cancel 20 flights last week because of pilot shortages.

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US companies announce layoffs

Twenty-two thousand employees at AMP Inc.'s worldwide operations will lose their jobs in August due to the Asian economic crisis. AMP is the world's largest supplier of electronic connectors for companies such as Dell and IBM. It has offered incentives to 2,200 employees over the age of 55 to take retirement by October. The company has also frozen wages.

The Asian crisis was also cited for the decision to lay off 558 workers at Buckbee-Mear, located in Cortland, New York. The workers make aperture masks for televisions and computer screens.

The CNA Financial Corporation plans to eliminate 1,100 jobs, as part of the reorganization of its commercial insurance unit. CNA, the nation's third largest property and casualty insurer, said the layoffs would take effect over the next 18 months. Approximately 100 workers at its Chicago headquarters would be affected.

Morton International announced that it would close three operations and eliminate 120 jobs. The company, a producer of specialty chemicals and salt, is closing an administrative and sales office in Danvers, Massachusetts, a plant in Garlasco, Italy and a laboratory and sales office in Coventry, England.

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Laid-off workers in Thailand demand compensation

Over 275 workers from a subsidiary of Siam Motor Group in Thailand are seeking the payment of pensions due to them worth 34 million baht. About 80 workers from the factory, Siam Parts Engineering Co., staged a protest outside the Labor Ministry this week, calling on the government to negotiate with the company for the immediate payment of pensions owed to the laid-off workers.

Under their employment contracts, workers are entitled to receive a pension on retirement or when laid off. The company closed down its operations June 30 and sacked all its employees without paying them their pension entitlements. An offer by management to pay the pensions in two installments of 25 percent in July and 75 percent in September was rejected by the workers.

Most of the workers are too old to find new jobs, even if jobs were available, and desperately need the money to survive. Representatives of the protesting workers are to hold further talks with management later this

week.

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Telstra workers demand action

Australian communication workers employed by Telstra, the government-owned communications network, are demanding a national campaign, including rolling strikes and work bans, to win a 16 percent pay claim over two years. The company has only offered to pay 2 percent.

The workers, members of the Communications Electrical and Plumbers Union, are angry that negotiations between the union and the company for a new work agreement have dragged on for nearly a year with no results.

At mass meetings last year, union officials rejected calls for strike action and pushed through a resolution for a campaign of "passive aggression." They insisted that there would be no work-to-rule bans but only a withdrawal of "good will," as the beginning of a "long drawn-out campaign that would gather momentum and scope."

This week the union's Victorian branch secretary Len Cooper admitted that the campaign has had no effect on Telstra. Cooper acknowledged that even as the union was locked in the protracted discussions, Telstra had gone ahead and axed "some longstanding conditions of employment." "The members are very, very angry and have actually been demanding action from the union well before this," he said.

However, the union is already attempting to delay industrial action. Its national executive decided last week that national meetings of the 50,000 workers will not be called until early August.

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Aged care nurses demand pay increase

Nurses employed by private aged care homes in Victoria, Australia, are demanding a wage increase of 15 percent to achieve wage parity with their counterparts in the hospitals. Nurses in the aged care sector have not received a wage increase since 1991. They are also seeking the retention of a guaranteed ratio of nurses to patients.

Current work agreements state there must be one registered nurse for every 10 residents on day shift and one for every 15 residents at night. Under its Workplace Relations Act, the Australian federal government is moving to ensure there is no stipulated level of care provided to the residents of nursing homes.

In 1995 the Victorian state government moved to deregulate aged care by opening the way for private operators to circumvent the staffing ratios through the amalgamation of nursing homes with hostels which require less trained staff. Many of the homes are already severely undermanned.

Private nursing home owners have rejected the pay claim, saying that an increase will only be granted through increased funding from the federal government, which cut over \$500 million from age care funding in 1997. The Australian Nursing Federation has already lifted work bans at 20 nursing homes and is now attempting to bury the dispute in the industrial courts.

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Nurses impose work bans

Elective surgery in three major hospitals in Tasmania, Australia may have to be canceled as nurses, members of the Australian Nursing Federation, impose industrial bans for an 11 percent pay claim.

A meeting of 130 nurses at the Launceston General Hospital voted at the beginning of the week to take the same action as their colleagues at the North-West Regional Hospital who are closing every third bed as it becomes vacant at the hospital's northern acute care facility. Nurses at Royal Hobart Hospital, in Tasmania's capital, are expected to take similar action.

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French Disneyland workers strike against low pay

Restaurant workers, technicians and performers at Euro Disneyland in

Paris have struck for more than two weeks in opposition to low rates of pay. The workers are demanding a 7 percent pay rise, claiming that they are being underpaid. The strike action has involved around 200 workers.

Disneyland management has opposed the pay claim with spokesman Michel Dompnier stating that a "A 7 percent raise is impossible." Some of the slogans of the strikers on the picket lines are on placards in the French, English and Spanish languages. One banner read: "Yesterday we were surviving to allow people to dream. Today, we're just dreaming of surviving."

On July 6 the company made an agreement with 15 technicians. The core of the agreement is the establishment of a committee to discuss the demands of technicians. Negotiators representing the parade performers rejected a management offer to give 80 of the 220 workers "artist status." The deal would increase parade performers wages by around 1,000 francs a month to 8,500 francs (US\$1,390).

The dispute coincides with Disneyland's shares increasing by 77 percent this year in Paris and London. The company is expected to report a large profit margin, and has seen more than 11 million people visit the park this year.

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Coal miners in Russia block Trans-Siberian railway

Two months after blocking the Trans-Siberian railway in a dispute over overdue payments, Russian miners again blocked freight trains last week. Two Siberian towns, Yurga and Anzhero-Sudzhensk, are at the core of the rail blockade which is at the northern section of the Trans-Siberian line. The Tass news agency reported that 17 freight trains had been held up by the blockade and another 40 had ground to a halt.

During the previous dispute, miners called for the resignation of President Boris Yeltsin. The dispute in May was only ended because of government promises to pay the outstanding wages of miners.

Miners refused to meet a government delegation that had traveled to Anzhero-Sudzhensk in the Siberian area of Kemerovo to discuss the latest dispute and the situation in the coal industry. One of the delegates was Deputy Fuel and Energy Minister Igor Kozhukhovskiy. Other local factory workers have joined the dispute.

Miners from the Vorkuta region in Siberia have been demonstrating outside the White House government building in Moscow because of the issue of overdue wages. Many miners in the region live in dire poverty, with some having to accept payment in the form of a packed lunch (tormozok) which includes bread, some meat, boiled eggs and some onion. For each lunch that miners must accept, around \$1 is deducted from the wages owed to them by the company.

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Irish dockers prevent use of port by oil company

Irish dock workers at the Port of Foynes in County Limerick stopped a supply vessel from servicing the oilrig of Enterprise Oil, the oil exploration company, on July 1. The dispute, which was unofficial, comes after the dockers union SIPTU said that Enterprise Oil was employing workers from other European Union countries, but not from Ireland. A spokesman from SIPTU said that Enterprise Oil had a policy of not employing Irish workers from the beginning in preference to other workers. The legitimate claim of dockers in Ireland to jobs is being threatened by the policy of the union, which opposes a united struggle of dock workers throughout the EU in defense of jobs and conditions.

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Apple Computers cuts 150 jobs

Apple Computers is to cut its work force in Cork in the Irish republic by 150. The redundancies are part of Apple's two-year global restructuring program. The company presently employs 1,800 workers at its manufacturing plant in Cork and the job losses will hit workers at the printed circuit board and service repair department.

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Four thousand job losses for rolling bearing workers

Four thousand workers worldwide are to lose their jobs at SKF, the Swedish rolling bearing manufacturer. Workers in 80 sites, mainly in Western Europe and North America, will be affected. SKF is the largest producer of rolling bearings in the world and supplies parts for all types of machines that use rotating parts.

The restructuring strategy is designed to improve profit margins. Alongside the 10 percent cut in its global work force, SKF is planning to shut factories and decrease levels of stock. The company cited overproduction of bearings worldwide and the impact of the Asian currency collapse for its restructuring program, which is costing \$214 billion.

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Eagle Star workers in Britain to lose 540 jobs

BAT Industries, which announced 1,600 job losses in May, is to cut a third of these at its Eagle Star Commercial subsidiary in Britain. Eagle Star's primary branches in Leicester and Southampton are to close next year. The company's commercial underwriting branches in 11 towns and cities will also close. Those affected are in Edinburgh, Liverpool, Sheffield, Newcastle, Watford, Reading, Chelmsford, Maidstone and Cardiff.

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British manufacturing report charts increase in job losses and recession

A report from the Chartered Institute for Purchasing and Supply has concluded that British manufacturing firms are carrying out job losses at the fastest rate in five years. The report stated that all manufacturing activity had fallen in June, for the third month in succession. A consecutive fall in manufacturing output is termed a recession in the City.

"Widespread downsizing has resulted in redundancies at an increasing number of firms while staff lost through natural wastage have generally not been replaced," the report says. It cites the strong pound and the decreasing cost of imported goods as causes of the increase in job losses and recession.

In May, official employment, which plays down the true unemployment total, recorded a rise for the first time in more than two years. In June more jobs were cut than at any time in the past five years.

The Office for National Statistics has predicted that manufacturing is in recession, and has forecast a shrinkage in output of 0.5 percent. The last time a prediction of recession in manufacturing was made was in December 1992. A Times survey found that the number of people who think that the economic situation will worsen in the next year has increased substantially. Within four weeks confidence in the economy has declined from plus 1 percent to minus 19 percent.

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London Subway Workers Decide To Strike

London's underground workers have decided to strike for the second time this summer after a dispute over job security ended without agreement.

Members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union voted Tuesday for a 24-hour walkout starting Sunday night. The union's action came after it failed to obtain government assurances that neither train service nor employees' jobs and pensions would be affected by plans for private firms to help run parts of the system. More than 2 million people, including commuters and tourists, travel every day on the London Underground.

London Transport Chief Executive Denis Tunnicliffe said the strikes would not alter government plans for the system. The union, which represents one-third of the underground staff, staged a 48-hour walkout last month that disrupted subway services.

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