Workers' struggles around the world - 18 July 1998

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Asia

Singapore electronic layoffs

California-based electronics and computer manufacturer Adaptec has slashed 30 percent of its workforce, sacking 350 workers from its production facility in Bukit Merah, Singapore as part of a global cost-cutting exercise.

The company, which manufactures adapter cards used to link computers to printers and other external storage devices, has been operating in Singapore for 11 years. In recent months it has cut the working week from seven days to five. It shut down production entirely several times in April and May.

Following the layoffs the company announced it would return to seven-day working, driving up output from the workers who remain. A spokesman said more jobs are expected to go through "natural attrition" in coming months.

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Strike threatened at Philippine Airlines

Five thousand Philippine Airline (PAL) workers are threatening strike action to force the company to reinstate 3,000 workers sacked during the pilots' dispute. The workers, members of the PALEA union, include reservation clerks, maintenance crew, caterers and cargo handlers. In addition to servicing PAL, they handle work for 21 other airlines flying into Manila.

The union filed a strike notice with the labor department last month following the sackings. When a mandatory 15-day "cooling off" period ended on Monday July 13, labor secretary Bienvenido Laguesma issued an order to stop the strike, saying it would "be harmful to the Philippine economy". Laguesma directed PAL to cease further dismissals, but has refused to rule on the legality of the dismissals made so far.

PAL senior vice-president Avelino Zapanta urged the union to call off the strike. "Another strike would be the last blow," he said. "We appeal to the union to think of the future of the remaining employees, the airline and the country." He referred to plans by management and government to restructure the airline.

Under the restructuring program to be implemented in September, PAL will slash thousands more jobs, sell off 40 of its 54 planes, scrap two-thirds of its routes and sell off subsidiaries. This comes on top of sacking 625 pilots and 5,000 ground staff in the last month.

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Australia

Dental nurses demand pay increase

Nurses from the Royal Dental Hospital (RDH) in Victoria went on strike for half a day on July 9 and protested at the front of the hospital. The dental nurses, members of the Health Services Union of Australia, are demanding a 9 percent pay increase over two years to bring them in line with general nursing staff.

The wages of dental nurses are extremely low -- those with more than 25 years service receive only $12.40 per hour. Their work is very stressful and includes emergency work as well as dealing with mentally disturbed patients.

Management is insisting that a wage rise be tied to productivity increases and the elimination of working conditions. The nurses have been asked to take time off in lieu of overtime and other penalty payments and to reduce meal breaks to only half an hour after working more than five hours straight.

The RDH is the second largest government dental hospital in Australia. Since 1997 the federal Liberal government has cut $25 million from its budget. The shortfall has been made up by cutting services. The average waiting time for treatment has increased from six months in 1995 to two years.

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No action to defend Amcor jobs

Hundreds of more jobs are threatened at Amcor, one of Australia's largest paper making companies, following its earlier decision to close down the pulp mill in Burnie, Tasmania, by October at the cost of 220 jobs.

As part of a worldwide restructuring of its operations, the company is demanding a 15 percent return from all of its plants.

Workers at the Maryvale paper mill in Victoria have already been told that 51 production jobs will go. At the Broadford plant in northern Victoria 100 workers were sacked last year and the remaining 20 could lose their jobs shortly. The futures of paper mills at Shoalhaven and Botany in New South Wales and Wesley Vale in Tasmania are uncertain.

Stopwork meetings were called by the Construction Forestry Mining

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and Energy Union (CFMEU) at the Burnie mill and union delegates have met at other factories to discuss the closures.

But the union has no plan or perspective to defend jobs. Instead, it has asked to be consulted about job losses and that redundancies be implemented by voluntary means. The union has suggested that instead of "asset stripping," the company should drive up productivity and become more competitive on the world market.

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Gretley miners protest closure

More than sacked 30 miners from the Gretley mine, near Newcastle, packed the Industrial Relations Court in Sydney on Wednesday to protest the dismissal of 66 workers earlier this month. The entire workforce was retrenched and the mine put on a "care and maintenance" basis. The company, after initially sending a letter to workers insisting that they accept a new work agreement to cut working conditions or be sacked, suddenly announced that the closure would go ahead "due to economic reasons."

Oakbridge, the company that owns Gretley, said the mine may reopen in the future but would employ contract labour. The mining union has not taken any action against the closure and has not called a general meeting of miners in the area to discuss it.

Four miners were killed in a disaster at Gretley in 1996. Management announced the closure only days before the release of the findings of a judicial inquiry into the tragedy.

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Europe

Workers protest against Yeltsin government

Hundreds of coal miners in Siberia continued their blockade of the Trans-Siberian railway last week to protest the non-payment of wages and pension benefits. Miners from Osinniki have joined the dispute along with others from Yurga and Anzhero-Sudhzensk. Cargo trains in the three towns are being blocked, with only passenger and postal trains being allowed through. The government has not met any of the demands.

Miners in the Arctic Komi region have joined the Siberian workers in protest at the government breaking promises it made to end the last dispute in May. Talks began with a government delegation led by Deputy Fuel and Energy Minister Igor Kozhukhovsky on July 7, after miners representatives had refused to meet him the previous day. The Railway Ministry has said that losses incurred by the blockade have reached $2 million and that 200,000 to 250,000 tonnes of goods are being held up every day.

Anatoly Chekis, a leader of the Kemerovo region Federation of Coal Miners Trade Unions, said that sailors had been fed dog meat in stew to save money. In Vladivostok, a port city in the Far East, some 500 power workers at three plants struck at the beginning of July, protesting the non-payment of wages for six months. The workers struck against the Dalenergo Energy Company, an arm of United Energy Systems. Workers in the former nuclear research city of Sarov have called a strike on July 23 for overdue wages and a 50 percent pay increase.

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Spanish airport workers strike

Spanish airport workers are to begin a 72-hour strike against the airport authority AENA on July 31. The dispute, which is expected to affect all Spanish airports, is in response to pay demands not being honoured by AENA. Most of the airport workers belong to three trade unions, the General Workers' Union (UGT), the Workers Commissions (CC.OO), and Workers' Union (USO).

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French defense workers protest thousands of job losses

More than 500 workers at the armoured vehicle group GIAT Industries protested outside its Satory headquarters near Versailles last week. The GIAT board was meeting to rubber-stamp a program of job cuts and rationalisations, but was forced to convene elsewhere.

The cuts flow from a massive rationalisation of the defense forces including the withdrawal from service of Maritime reconnaissance planes and two squadrons of Jaguar fighter-bombers. Support units are to be cut and military schools and five military hospitals closed.

A defense spokesman announced: "The units that we will deploy tomorrow will be less in number, lighter staffed, better equipped and well trained". A union spokesman said the announcements represented "the blackest Tuesday the industry has ever known". Workers are planning a day of action.

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Polish miners threaten action

Twelve Polish coal unions have threatened strike action against government plans to close half the remaining pits in the country and shed 105,000 jobs by 2002. Under the restructuring, coal output will be reduced from 137 million tonnes annually to 112 million, and just 26 pits would remain. The head of the Miners Trade Union, Jan Kisielinski, said: "The government approved the restructuring plan without proper consultation. We should sit down and discuss things... if not, trade unions have a right to protest."

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Workers strike again on the London Underground

Thousands of London Underground workers struck for one day on July 12/13 after talks broke down between the Rail Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) and management. Fifteen of the network's stations were closed for the day, with others being run at a reduced capacity.

The latest action follows a two-day strike RMT last month against the threatened privatisation of the system. The Underground sell-off is a flagship project of the Blair Labour government and is being carried out under the auspices of Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. The RMT represents 6,500 workers on the Underground network.

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British shipyard workers take unofficial action

Up to 900 workers at Aker McNulty, a shipyard in South Shields, Tyneside which makes North Sea oil-rig equipment, took unofficial strike action last week in opposition to a management-union pay agreement. Several hundred workers at the local Tyne Tees Dockyard, who were working on contract for Aker McNulty, walked off the job in support of their colleagues.

Following the action, Aker McNulty sacked its entire workforce and threatened to close the shipyard. This threat was lifted and the workers reinstated after they voted to return to work at a mass meeting. The shipyard union GMB issued a statement following the sackings, washing its hands of the dispute and the jobs of the workers.

The statement read: "We believe that the GMB has done an excellent job on behalf of the employees at this company. After extensive negotiations, the company offered an unprecedented earnings-protected agreement including an initial pay rise of 8.6 percent from January 1. Unfortunately, the workforce has rejected this offer, which was strongly recommended by our union officials and threatened to take further action. The company has as a result dismissed the workforce. We are disappointed that the offer was rejected and are concerned about the consequences for the workforce and the economy of the region."

A statement from the company welcomed the union's support. "The workforce have today rejected the offer recommended by the union and

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gone on unofficial strike. The union has withdrawn its support for this action. By these actions, the workforce have put themselves on an unofficial, illegal strike and therefore have broken their contract of employment with the company." Talks are continuing on the pay claim.

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Job losses hit brewing and steel

Workers at Morrells Brewery in Oxford, England face the sack with the announcement that the firm is being put up for sale. All told, 77 jobs are at risk at the brewery, which has traded for 216 years. The company announced that it was not able to compete "effectively" against bigger rivals. Kvaevner, a steel company, has announced that 170 jobs are to go at its plant in Sheffield by December.

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North America

Unions move to end Puerto Rican telephone strike

Union leaders representing 6,400 telephone workers are seeking a way to end their month-old strike against the Puerto Rican government's sell-off of the state-owned utility Puerto Rico Telephone Company (PRTC). Union delegates for both the Independent Telephone Employees Union and the Independent Brotherhood of Telephone Employees, representing respectively both office and blue collar sections of the workforce, voted July 15 to support appeals by union officials to the government for no victimizations against strikers or their supporters in exchange for ending the strike.

The climbdown comes in the wake of a 48-hour general strike held July 7 and 8 by the assembly of the Comit Amplio de Organizaciones (CAOS-Broad Committee of Trade Union Organization) representing 50,000 workers and 60 unions.

The struggle began in response to the announcement of the planned $1.9 billion sale of a controlling share of the PRTC to US-based GTE corporation. The telephone unions launched their strike June 18 demanding a public referendum over the issue. But citing "globalization" and "competitiveness," Puerto Rican Governor Pedro Rosello has refused to back down and instead unleashed violent attacks by police using teargas and clubs against strikers.

The sell-off of PRTC is the centerpiece of a plan that also aims to auction off public hospitals, state-owned hotels, utilities and undermine public education with a voucher program. It is the fear of a drastic loss of jobs and living standards that ignited wide support throughout the island colony for the telephone workers' strike.

The general strike brought port activity to a standstill, closed malls and supermarkets, and brought out thousands of workers from public sector jobs. Banco Popular, the main bank in the country, and a partner in the privatization of the PRTC, closed its doors in anticipation of massive protests.

Teachers picketed the Education Department and clashed with police. Several thousand students of the University Front Against Privatization gathered in Plaza Celulares to demonstrate. Police, FBI and SWAT teams occupied Louis Munoz Marin International Airport in an effort to maintain air travel. But workers jammed the airport's entrance with tractors and cars and armed themselves with sticks and baseball bats to discourage police attacks.

Annie Cruz, a leader of CAOS, said that the strike had attained the main goals - paralyzing industry, the banks and the commerce - and declared it a complete victory. But Rosello continued to hold firm and within days the union leadership, lacking any independent political program for the working class, was moving to scuttle the strike.

Meanwhile, there is new competition for the PRTC. Spain's Telefonica Internacional S.A. topped GTE with what is believed to be a $2 billion bid. GTE countered with an "enhanced offer" in an effort to secure a controlling interest.

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Striking Canadian paperworkers defy closure threat

Workers at Abitibi-Consolidated's Trois-Rivieres, Quebec, paper mill have reaffirmed their participation in a strike against Abitibi's operations in eastern Canada despite a threat by management to permanently close the mill if the strike is not quickly ended.

The leadership of the two Canadian Energy and Paperworkers union locals at the Trois-Rivieres plant ordered a vote on whether to continue the strike after the local plant manager sent each worker a letter repeating management's closure threat. But on July 12, a meeting of the 500-member production workers' local refused to entertain the local leadership's motion to hold a second strike ballot. Thereafter, the other local, which is comprised of 160 skilled tradesmen, voted not to count the secret ballot vote it had held earlier the same day.

5,000 CEP members have been on strike at 11 Abitibi mills in the eastern Canadian provinces of Newfoundland, Quebec and Ontario since June 15. The union is seeking to reach a settlement with Abitibi that can serve as a pattern for the 25,000 paperworkers represented by the union in eastern Canada.

The largest newsprint producer in the world, Abitibi is seeking to break the 30 year-old practice of pattern bargaining and impose a separate contract at each of the 11 mills. When the strike was in its third week, Abitibi threatened to permanently close both the Trois-Rivieres plant and a second mill in Chandler, Quebec.

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US: Angry Northwest machinists jeer union leaders

Rank and file members of the International Associations of Machinists at Northwest Airlines responded to a tentative contract by jeering union leaders during a series of informational meetings held July 14. At the largest meeting, held at 4 pm, 1,000 workers loudly booed union negotiators and at times shouted them down. They chanted "strike, strike, strike."

Paul Scarpari, a general chairman of IAM District 143, asserted that a third-shift worker spilled beer on him, cursed him and grabbed him by the shirt. The two reportedly fell to the floor, whereupon another worker allegedly kicked Scarpari. "He was saying, 'You screwed us,'" the union official told reporters. An angry worker later threw an egg at IAM Grand Lodge Representative Marv Sandrin.

Northwest's workers accepted wage cuts from 1993 to 1996. The airline has recently recorded record profits and company executives have received massive compensation. The tentative deal includes a 14 percent wage increase over four years, which won't be applied retroactively to the fall of 1996, when the old contract ran out. It also contains changes that would require more weekend shifts for mechanics and a restructuring of Northwest's staff of office clerks.

Union bureaucrats received a similar response at informational meetings in Detroit. Machinists will vote July 29 on the proposed deal.

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