Workers struggles around the world 25 July 1998

25 July 1998

Australia

Police attack warehouse workers

Striking warehouse workers picketing Davids Holdings at two sites in Sydney are facing increasing attacks by the company and the police. Another 40 were arrested on a picket line at Blacktown just after a mass meeting on Thursday.

The 400 workers have been on strike since July 8 following the breakdown of talks between the National Union of Workers and the company over the terms of a new work agreement. The company has been emboldened by the union's refusal to broaden the dispute. At its instructions, the state Labor government of Premier Bob Carr continues to mobilise large contingents of police that sometimes outnumber the pickets.

The company has hardened its position, refusing to discuss the reinstatement of more than 50 workers sacked for picketing. It has also increased its original demand for the doubling of the casual work force from 15 percent to 30 percent, to 50 percent. At the same time, 400 supermarket retailers have joined Davids Holdings in a legal action seeking millions of dollars in damages from the union.

The sweeping changes demanded to working conditions follow the takeover of Davids by the South African-based company, Metro Cash and Carry, as part of a global restructuring of the food retailing industry.

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Union offers Amcor an Indonesian benchmark

Workers at the Amcor pulp and paper mill in Burnie, Tasmania have been told by the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CMFEU) that they must increase productivity and lower costs to keep their jobs.

As part of its global restructuring, Amcor is closing its Burnie pulp mill in October, resulting in the loss of 150 jobs directly and over 600 jobs in the area. The company is demanding that all its operations have a 15 percent rate of return or face closure at the end of the year.

The CMFEU claims it can oversee the production of pulp cheaper than the same product presently imported by the company from Indonesia. During June, costs at Burnie have been slashed by 5 percent or $100 per tonne through new work measures and by improvements to machine operations.

Union members at the company's Maryvale factory in the Latrobe Valley of Victoria held a stop-work meeting last week. The union did not propose any industrial action against impending job cuts, or in support of the Burnie workers, but called on workers to endorse a "political, industrial and community campaign."

Union official Michael O'Connor said the union was concerned about "job security", but he made it clear that the union's main grievance was that it had not been consulted about the proposed changes. He said the union would campaign for a better redundancy package if it were not possible to keep the Burnie mill open. Other stop-work meetings are to be held next week at the company's paper mills in Fairfield, Victoria and Botany and Shoalhaven in New South Wales.

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NSW Ambulance officers impose bans

Ambulance officers in Sydney imposed work bans on Thursday after the New South Wales Ambulance Service refused to meet their demands for an increased number of ambulances on night shifts in the city. The work bans will not effect medical and other emergency calls but could halt sports events and racing meetings. Jockeys in the past have refused to ride unless ambulance personnel are on hand. The bans will also hit the transfer of patients from nursing homes and hospitals. The officers have refused to do paper work or participate in any proposed staff movements.

A spokesman for the Health and Research Employees Union said that the union was "gravely concerned" over the threat to the public posed by inadequate services. The NSW Ambulance Service has agreed to the union's demand for at least 92 vehicles to be on the road every night, but has refused an interim demand that at least 79 be made operational while more staff are recruited. Fewer than 63 ambulances are currently available for night service. The last dispute over staffing in 1996 forced the state Labor government to recruit an extra 170 staff and allocate money for a pay rise.

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Asia and the Pacific

PNG communication workers delay strike

Telecommunication workers in Papua New Guinea have delayed national strike action following the Aitape tidal wave disaster. The strike, over the government's refusal to pay its share of the Public Officers Superannuation Fund, was due to start on Wednesday. The government's share of about K23 million should have been transferred to the National Provident Fund when the Post PNG and PNG Telikom became incorporated companies.

Discussions over a 20-month period between the communications union and government broke down last week and more than 95 percent of the workers voted for an immediate strike. They also decided to direct the strike at mainly big business interests, while maintaining services to aged homes, hospitals and ambulance services.

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Thousands of jobs go in Thailand

With over 2.8 million unemployed already, job shedding shows no signs of abating in Thailand. Thai Melon Textiles, one of the country's largest textile manufacturers, has shut down operations and retrenched its remaining work force of 5,000. In 1997 it sacked 8,000 workers in a desperate effort to maintain profitability.

The jobs crisis is affecting wide layers of both the industrial working class and the professional middle classes and fuelling social tensions. Of 300,000 employed by the auto industry in 1997, over 80,000 have been sacked. The University Affairs Minister said he feared that few of the 48,000 new university graduates would find employment.

Labour Minister Trairong Suwankhiri stated this week that the jobs of a further 250,000 workers are in danger at 790 medium-to-large companies, which are suffering severe liquidity problems and expected to fall into

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bankruptcy. Thousands of workers are receiving no pay as firms seek to stay afloat at the expense of their work forces.

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Europe

Russian miners end Trans-Siberian railway blockade

Miners in Russia ended their two-week blockade of the Trans-Siberian railway on July 19. Their action began on July 3 following the government reneging on promises to pay wages owed to them. The government had promised to resolve the issue of unpaid wages following a similar two-week blockade in May.

While some miners were blockading the line in Siberia, others from the region had been demonstrating and picketing the White House in Moscow. The line was cleared before a meeting of government representatives, including Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Sysuyev, with miners' leaders on July 19.

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Pilots to strike in Cyprus

Pilots started a three-day strike against Cyprus Airways on July 23 over the airline's failure to negotiate a collective contract. The company is attempting to implement staff reductions, pay cuts and a wage freeze.

The pilots union, Pasipy, announced the strike after talks with the company broke down. A union spokesman said, "This decision was reached after a lot of thought and we have shown great patience on the renewal of our collective agreement. Pilots are workers and pilots have rights and the decision to strike has not been without regrets."

The 95 workers involved have not had a rise in pay since 1989, belying claims by the company that they are some of the best-paid pilots in the world.

Eurocypria, a charter firm owned by Cyprus Airways, could also be hit, as 10 of its pilots are members of Pasipy. In an attempt to whip up hostility to the strikes, Cyprus Airways said the pilots were "showing contempt for the tourist industry and the public." The airline has called for further negotiations with the union. Last year's annual report revealed the firm lost $5.8 million.

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Portuguese harbour pilots plan July, August strikes

Harbour pilots in Portugal have announced a series of strikes in July and August to protest against a government pay offer of 2.75 percent and restructuring plans. The industrial action will take place on July 21-24, July 27-31 and August 3-7, affecting Portugal's eight ports and all of the 60 pilots in the country.

The government has refused to negotiate on the 5 percent pay demand made by the pilots' trade unions. A spokesman for the Union of State Technical Workers said, "All cargo deliveries will be affected, including grains and oil. There could be some impact on tourism because passenger vessels will also be affected."

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Spanish airline workers on go-slow

On July 20, unions representing 7,500 Spanish airport workers initiated a go-slow campaign in advance of a three-day strike at the end of July, the busiest time of year. Unions are demanding that AENA, the Spanish airport, reclassify a number of job descriptions, expected to cost the company approximately 500 million pesetas (US$3.3 million).

A spokesman for the unions admitted the action was a token gesture, saying, "Unions have called for a work to rule, but there shouldn't be an immediate impact on airports." In June AENA concluded an agreement with striking air traffic controllers by hiring more workers.

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British social workers walk out

Social workers at Sheffield's Children and Families Access and Assessment (CFAA) department walked off the job July 21 in opposition to the rundown of the service. The members of the social service union UNISON taking action included three teams of social workers and an administration support unit. They are protesting a cut-back in resources and a substantial increase in their workload.

The CFAA service was reorganised by Sheffield City Council on June 1 and a number of staff had to take on extra duties whilst maintaining their old cases. Their working week is very intensive, as they are on call from 8.45 a.m. to 5.15 p.m., and are only allowed half an hour off on Friday.

A fact sheet published by the strikers called attention to some of their grievances: "The volume of work for administration is intolerable and backlogs are getting worse. Workers are regularly being threatened and assaulted by angry service users who can't find the services they need. There is no time for staff and team meetings to discuss the issues that we face."

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South Korean firm closes in Britain

Sung Kwang Electro Mechanics (UK), a South Korean firm, is to close its plant in the Dearne Valley, South Yorkshire, England with the loss of 25 jobs. The Dearne Valley is the largest Enterprise Zone in England**.** The plant was only opened one year ago as part of a deal agreed by previous Tory Prime Minister John Major for the firm to invest in Britain. The company cited the Asian economic crisis for its decision.

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Pay strikes threatened Turkish coalition

Amidst fears of a general strike and widespread industrial unrest, Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister, Bulent Ecevit, issued a statement on July 18 that agreement had been reached between the government and its coalition partners on public sector pay policy. At a news conference Ecevit stated, "Under the deal, public employees will receive a 20 percent rise immediately and then a further 10 percent for the three months to October."

The agreement has temporarily prevented a collapse of the fragile coalition forming Turkey's government. The threatened rupture arose after a coalition partner insisted on a 40 percent increase. They argued that with Turkey's annual consumer rate of inflation now standing at 90 percent, such a pay rise was necessary.

The president of the minority coalition, Yilmaz, expressed fear that the dispute could see the fall of the government. Ecevit said the rise would not dent his commitment to reducing the annual inflation rate to 50 percent.

The Turkish government has agreed for the IMF to monitor its economy and progress towards economic targets. The wage increase is technically a breach of the IMF agreement. In a sign of the growing crisis, Ecevit said the priority was the maintenance of the coalition. "We are not looking at the issue from the point of view of the IMF," he said. "We haven't requested any credit from the IMF anyway."

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Turkish workers to strike at US air bases

Up to 1,800 workers, members of the Harb-Is Union, are to strike the three US air bases at Incilik, Ankara and Izmir in response to attacks on the conditions of civilian workers at the bases. Claiming that they are not under Turkish labour law, management wants to bring in sub-contractors, increase the use of dependants of US service personnel and deregulate all working practices. The strikes follow the collapse of talks begun on March 19.

According to a statement issued on July 17 by Cetin, the union president, "The US management, now taking advantage of one of the most regressive stipulations of Turkey's Labour Code, has declared a lockout, with a view to push our workers into despair and pressurise our union."

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Greek public sector hit by 24-hour strike

Workers in public transport, utilities and state-controlled banks struck for 24 hours in protest of the government's plans to "liberalise" the labour market. Their action on July 23 also hit the state carrier Olympic Airways

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and the railways. Unions representing public sector workers say the government's plans will lead to mass dismissals and reductions in real wages. Plans to restructure rail and bus services will result in longer working hours.

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The Americas

GTE Corp. secures Puerto Rican Telephone Company

Puerto Rican Governor Pedro Rosello declared July 21 that the decision to grant a controlling interest in the Puerto Rican Telephone Company (PRTC) to US-based GTE Corporation for some $2 billion is "firm and final." Spain's Telefonica Internacional S.A. had challenged GTE, but company officials submitted an "enhanced offer" to retain their interest.

The deal was concluded in the wake of a two-day general strike throughout the island colony against the government's sell-off of PRTC, which is only one part of a privatization plan that aims that put other utilities and hospitals on the chopping block.

The failure of the general strike to sway the government has thrown the Puerto Rican union leadership into a crisis. Union leaders offered the government a return to work if the Rosello administration promised no victimisations, but talks broke off. The return to work offer was poorly received by the 6,400 telephone workers who have been out on strike since June 18 demanding the government submit the privatisation scheme to a popular referendum of the island's population.

Part of the labour bureaucracy supported the Telephonica offer simply because it promised to honour the present union contracts and not cut jobs for four years. GTE, while also claiming to honour union contracts, offered only a one-year moratorium on job cutting.

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IBEW ends strike against Rockwell

The 600 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers ended a 49-day strike against Rockwell International's semiconductor division in Newport Beach, California, after failing to get any agreement on the workers' major concern--12-hour shifts. The strike "really didn't change much," said one worker.

The end of the strike resulted in the imposition of the company's original offer of pay increases without the union demand for eight-hour workdays. Instead, workers will now work 12-hour shifts: four days on, three days off, three days on, four days off.

Rockwell recently announced it would spin off the semiconductor division by the end of 1998. The unit makes semiconductor components including its modem chipset. Increasing competition in the industry has led to price slashing, resulting in losses.

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See Also:
Full Coverage of the General Motors strike

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