

Workers struggles around the world: 15 August 1998

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Australia and the South Pacific

Police attack Papua New Guinea strikers

Police fired tear gas to disperse a meeting of about 300 striking Public Motor Vehicle (PMV) drivers and offsidiers in the capital Port Moresby on Tuesday. Police declared the gathering illegal and opened fire when the workers refused to disperse. The police then chased the workers through the streets and nearby markets.

The sudden strike was called by the drivers themselves. They are demanding that owners pay the heavy fines imposed on drivers because of the poor condition of vehicles. The drivers were also protesting against continuous harassment by the traffic police.

The Chief Director of Traffic denounced the strike, saying: "If the drivers are not happy with the traffic rules, they should pack up and ship out." He was joined by the general secretary of the Amalgamated Workers Union who condemned the strike saying it "was uncalled for" and that "there are better ways for them to resolve their differences."

The police are threatening to withdraw PMV licences from operators over traffic offences effectively robbing them of a living.

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Academics threaten strike in Papua New Guinea

Academics at the University of Papua New Guinea held a stop work meeting this week to discuss strike action in support of their claim for improved salaries, better security and proper amenities on the campus.

The 120 members of the National Academics Staff Association are

demanding that the university do away with its dual salary system under which expatriate staff are paid far more than native academics. A union spokesman said that the association had been fighting the issue for 10 years.

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Conditions of Australian miners eroded

The Australian Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) handed down a decision this week further eroding the conditions of coal miners employed at the Currah mine in central Queensland owned by ARCO Australia.

The decision will allow the company to dispense with the present minimum manning levels for the mine's overall operation or for working any individual piece of equipment. It will also end all demarcation barriers between production and maintenance workers, and permit white-collar staff to engage in production work.

All restrictions on the use of contract labour will be removed. Seniority rules for allocating work rosters and determining retrenchments on a last-on, first-off basis will be scrapped. The company will also have the right to force miners to work 12-hour shifts.

The IRC ordered the temporary reinstatement of a \$300 weekly bonus removed by the company during the strike but did not grant back payment. The decision comes almost 12 months to the day after the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union called off a strike at the mine after the IRC intervened.

The latest IRC decision sets a new benchmark that will be imposed throughout the mining industry.

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Workforce dismissed at Australian abattoir

The entire workforce of around 100 meatworkers at the Mount Shank abattoir near Mount Gambier in South Australia was dismissed in a dispute that has striking parallels to this year's sacking of waterfront workers.

As in the case of Patrick Stevedores employees, employment of the meatworkers was transferred two years ago to two labour hire companies which in turn had a contract to supply labour to the abattoir.

The Australiasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) began legal proceedings against the Mount Shank group for underpayment of wages at the company's abattoir. During the court proceedings, the directors put the labour hire companies into voluntary administration, effectively dismissing the work force.

A Federal Court has frozen the company's assets and ordered it not to hire any new non-union employees while the case is being heard.

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The Americas

Conrail Track Employees Strike

Track maintenance workers struck at Conrail, the railroad freight company, August 14. The strike by the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees is over Conrail's use of outside contractors to build tracks in Marysville, Ohio. Other railroad unions honored the union's picket

lines, shutting down the railroad.

Conrail, originally set up in 1976 to reorganize six bankrupt Northeast railroads, operates in 12 states in the Northeast and Midwest, Washington, D.C., and Quebec in Canada. It has about 23,500 employees and 11,000 miles of track. Two other railroads, CSX and Norfolk Southern, are in the process of buying parts of Conrail, splitting the company between them.

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San Francisco garbage workers oppose strike settlement

East Bay garbage strikers have denounced a "final" settlement offered by management which is being pushed by Teamsters Local 315 and regional union officials. More than 180 workers have been on strike for two weeks against Browning-Ferris, a private garbage collection company. The strike has affected 127,000 residential and commercial customers in portions of Contra Costa, Solano and Alameda counties.

The union has agreed to the company's demand for mandatory overtime levels which already reach 14 hours a day. Local 315 officials reportedly ditched the rank-and-file members of the negotiating team after two unsuccessful late-night bargaining sessions last week. According to union members, federal mediator Johnnie Scott Jr. advised the union that BFI negotiators were intimidated by the workers. Teamsters District Council President Chuck Mack has also stepped in to push through a pro-company settlement. "This is not a textbook negotiating session, but in the final analysis, it's whatever works," Mack told the San Francisco Chronicle.

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Strike deadline at US West

Union and company officials at US West have yet to resolve important contract issues as the Saturday, August 15 strike deadline approaches for 36,000 members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) in 14 different western and midwestern states. Management and the union have both called for the intervention of a federal mediator.

No agreement has been reached on the major issues of scheduling, forced overtime and the imposition of higher health-care costs to union members. US West also wants to extend its policy of pegging pay rates to productivity targets from customer service representatives, where it is currently in place, to field workers. In addition it is seeking greater flexibility in outsourcing of jobs and the creation of a part-time workforce.

Under conditions where US West has cut jobs, workers have at times put in 60 to 80 hours a week which has led to the demand for voluntary overtime. CWA members previously voted 92 percent in favor of granting strike authorization.

Last Monday, the CWA ended a two-day strike by 73,000 workers against Bell Atlantic, the nation's largest regional phone company. In return for the CWA's cooperation in boosting productivity and keeping labor costs down, Bell Atlantic agreed to allow the CWA to organize workers at some of its nonunion operations.

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Brazil dock strike hits coffee exports

A week-long strike at Santos, Brazil, South America's largest port, has halted most exports of Brazilian coffee and tied up ships loaded with other bulk goods--sugar exported from Brazil, wheat and soybeans entering the country. No cargo is moving through Santos, the port city for Sao Paulo, and over 100 million pounds of coffee are sitting in bags and containers awaiting loading into ships.

Crane operators and dockworkers walked out for six hours August 10 to protest the decision of a government labor tribunal cutting their wages. After the initial protest was called off, the workers struck indefinitely the following day. The dockworkers are fighting privatization of the docks by the government of President Fernando Enrique Cardoso. The Santos strike comes only three weeks before the scheduled auctioning-off of Sepetiba, Brazil's largest container port, on September 3.

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Africa

Strike shuts South African auto plants

A nationwide strike by autoworkers has shut down South Africa's seven car producers including Volkswagen AG, Toyota, Delta Motor Corp and Daimler Benz AG.

The strike went ahead on Friday after the auto employers rejected negotiations with the National Union of Metal Workers. The union, that represents 85 percent of the country's 21,000 autoworkers, is demanding a pay increase 2 percent above the inflation rate as part of a three-year wage package.

The Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration has intervened in an attempt to end the strike. It has called a conference for next Tuesday between the union and the employers' association.

A major strike by 47,000 chemical workers is continuing. It erupted on August 3 after last minute talks on the workers' claim for a 10.5 percent wage increase, a 40-hour week and paid sick leave, broke down. The strike is closing petrol stations across the country and striking workers have clashed with tanker drivers carting scab petrol from refineries.

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South African workers oppose privatisation

Over 100,000 workers in the South African province of Mpumalanga are threatening strike action on August 19 over the privatisation of the water supply by the Nelspruit Transitional Local Council. The council is planning to sign a 30-year contract with the British multinational company Biwater.

The strike, organised by the umbrella union organisation COSATU, will bring the entire province to a standstill. The Municipal Workers Union [SAMWU] claims that the council is in breach of the new Water Services Act. Under the act, alternative public water providers must be investigated before privatisation proceeds.

Authorities have made no attempt to upgrade water services to the "townships" since the apartheid era. A recent article in the Business Report newspaper revealed that the "townships" have a population of over 100,000 people and only 17 water supply workers. In the more affluent areas, 125 workers are employed to deliver water to 25,000 people.

Biwater Chairman Adrian White admitted in a recent interview that water contracts "are not good for the client." He added: "They are, however, superb for the contractor who gets four sources of profit: construction, financial engineering, equity dividend and management contract."

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Europe & Russia

Russian trade union leader threatens nationwide strike over unpaid wages

Head of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions, Andrei Isayev, warned on August 6 of nationwide strikes demanding unpaid wages and against austerity measures to be introduced by the Russian government under instructions from the International Monetary Fund. Isayev, a supporter of the Stalinist Russian Communist Party said, "If the government wants total war, it's going to get it. The legendary patience of the Russian people is coming to an end." Isayev said that the national strike would be indefinite and could begin on October 7.

The Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov said in response that the government would cut off all finance to coal producing regions if miners continued to blockade railway lines across the country. Nemtsov reported that in May the disputes caused losses worth 500 million roubles (\$80 million), and in July and August have cost the railways more than 100 million roubles.

Russian workers are owed \$11.3 billion in back pay from the government and private sector companies. Russian miners are continuing their blockade of the Trans-Siberian railway in the Urals in protest against

unpaid wages. Some 70 coal miners in Partizansk, near Vladivostok, are on a hunger strike in protest over unpaid wages. The strike has continued for more than two weeks.

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Firefighters strike continues in southern England

On August 7 fire fighters in Essex, Southern England, went on strike for the twenty-second time since June. The latest action began after talks between Essex Fire Authority and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) broke up August 6 after just 20 minutes. The dispute centres on the authority's proposal to cut jobs in an attempt to reduce its budget by 1million.

The Essex Fire Authority is spending 90,000 a week hiring Emergency Green Goddesses (army vehicles) and extra police patrols in an effort to break the strikes. A union spokesman Paul Adams said after the talks failed, "I am extremely disappointed that the fire authority has wasted our time and yet another opportunity to try to resolve this dispute. It is quite clear that the council neither cares nor understands about the extreme dangers caused by these cuts."

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Glasgow social workers take unofficial action over jobs and conditions

Around 2,000 social workers in Glasgow, Scotland who have been involved in unofficial strike action since August 3 ended their dispute on August 10. The workers are employed by Glasgow City Council to care for children and the elderly. Glasgow's social work department is one of Europe's largest.

The dispute began following the suspension of three care workers who refused to co-operate with changes in the domestic care service. As part of the council's recent package of cuts, it intends to transfer the 3,000 workers from the home help service to the catering and cleaning department. Striking workers fear extensive job losses, reduction in the quality of service to the most vulnerable sector of the population and privatisation. The council has already introduced charges for home care services.

The trade union that represents most of the workers, UNISON, repudiated the action and demanded staff return to work and accept the new terms. At a mass meeting last Thursday workers overwhelmingly rejected the UNISON proposal and voted to continue the unofficial strike.

On August 7, the Labour Party-controlled Local Authority won a court order against the unofficial strike. UNISON was instructed not to engage in "inciting, procuring, authorising, encouraging, organising or assisting" workers involved in a strike without an officially recognised ballot. The Local Authority used managers and volunteers at some of the homes to keep them nominally open.

The Greater Glasgow Health Board stated that there was a possibility that some residents would have to be admitted to hospitals and asked nursing staff to volunteer to work in care homes. Catriona Renfrew, the director of commissioning at the Health Board, said that hospitals might "have to open up beds and cancel elective operations if the action continues and there will be knock-on effects on hospital waiting lists."

At a mass meeting held in the Glasgow Concert Hall on August 10, workers voted to end the unofficial strike. Two of the three members of staff who were suspended at the start of the dispute went back to work with the strikers. Another motion was passed condemning the actions of council leaders, management of the social work department and trade union officials for failing to support the strike. The motion stated that the workers would continue to oppose the rundown of council services and would oppose it "by all possible means including a public relations campaign".

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Strike continues at US military base in Turkey

Striking workers at the Incirlik Air Base in Turkey have accused US military personnel of carrying out violent attacks and verbal abuse against

them during the three-week strike which has shut down the commissary, gas station, dining halls and other facilities at the US Air Force facility. The strike by 1,400 workers, which began July 23, has also disrupted services at bases in Ankara and Izmir. Incirlik is the hub of operations for US and British patrol flights over the no-fly zone in northern Iraq.

The strikers are demanding that salaries be raised every three months in line with inflation, now running at around 70 percent a year. They are also demanding improved benefits and compensation for earlier pay cuts. Strikers rejected the latest US offer last week and negotiations have been deadlocked since then.

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Asia

Indonesian miners strike

About 5,000 miners went on strike at Freeport Indonesia's huge gold and copper mine on the island of New Guinea August 10. The company, a unit of the New Orleans-based Freeport-McMoRan Copper and Gold Inc. is partially owned by the Indonesian government and a charitable foundation headed by former President Suharto. The workers are demanding pay raises to keep up with skyrocketing prices.

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South Korean government threatens Hyundai workers

The South Korean regime has demanded that Hyundai Motor Co. workers end their month-long strike by next week or face being forcibly removed from the company's plants. The nation's largest automaker has been idle since July 20 when thousands of workers began picketing the company's main plants in Ulsan, 175 miles southeast of Seoul, to protest rising layoffs.

Thousands of riot police have been deployed around the Ulsan plants. "We can not let this illegal work stoppage drag down the economy forever," said Kim Soo-min, a senior prosecutor in charge of public security. "A police raid is inevitable." Authorities have ruled the strike illegal, noting that the union did not seek mandatory government mediation. Workers prepared for a police raid by erecting more barricades.

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