Workers Struggles Around the World - 22 August 1998

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The Americas

Canadian parts plant strike could affect US automakers

A strike by 120 workers begun Monday at Wescast Industries in Wingham, Ontario, the world's leading maker of exhaust manifolds, could quickly disrupt production of top-selling models produced by Big Three US auto companies.

The workers, members of the Canadian Auto Workers, have been without a contract for several months and struck over wages and benefits. The company built 11 million of the 60 million iron exhaust manifolds installed worldwide last year. The Wingham factory supplies Ford, Chrysler and GM's Saturn Division.

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Peterbilt truck strike four months old

Negotiations between the United Auto Workers and truck manufacturer Peterbilt, aimed at ending a walkout by 1,200 workers at the company's Nashville, Tennessee plant, have come to no agreement. UAW leaders offered "creative and flexible proposals" but the company refused to budge on key issues such as cost of living increases, retiree health care benefits, and opportunities for workers with 30 years or more to retire before the age 65 without losing part of their benefits.

Peterbilt has hired strikebreakers and brought in Vance Security, a notorious union-busting firm. Workers have been on strike since May 3. Last month they rejected the company's "final offer" by an 85 percent margin.

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Pilots union and Northwest Airlines approach strike deadline

No progress has been reported in negotiations and 6,150 Northwest Airlines pilots are preparing for a long strike August 29, when a 30-day cooling-off period declared by a federal mediator ends. NWA has amassed a strike fund of $3 billion and says it can sustain a strike for up to 300 days.

The company has posted four straight years of record profits. The pilots, who took a 15 percent pay cut and other concessions earlier in the decade, are looking to be compensated. Other workers, including machinists, ground crews and flight attendants, are also pressing for improved wages and benefits.

The governors of six states, including Minnesota and Michigan where NWA has major hubs, have sent a letter to President Clinton urging him to intervene with a presidential order to stop the strike.

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Two workers killed in Texas oilrig collapse

Two workers were crushed to death when a 215-ton section of an oilrig collapsed on them at a shipyard in Sabine Pass, Texas August 18. Josh Warnock, 37, and Sammy Schooley, 31 were killed, and another worker injured. A crane was hoisting a 60-foot section about 20 feet in the air when it unexpectedly lowered the load. The rig was being constructed about 90 miles west of Houston, for use in drilling for oil and gas in the North Sea.

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Motorola to close Costa Rica plant

Citing a sharp fall off in the demand for chips, pagers and cell phones, Motorola Inc. announced that it will close its manufacturing plant in San Jose, Costa Rica, eliminating the jobs of 985 workers. Last month the company unveiled plans for sweeping downsizing and restructuring plans across its global operations.

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Africa

South African unions end strikes

Union leaders in South Africa have moved to wind down strikes in key industries throughout the country over the past week, fearing that a major confrontation is developing with the ANC government.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) called off a 24-hour strike by 100,000 workers against the privatization of the water and sanitation system in the province of Mpumalanga. A COSATU spokesman claimed the action would have been illegal because 14 days' notice was required under the Labor Relations Act.

Strikes in the auto and chemical industries were also closed down. The National Union of Metal Workers, covering 21,000 auto workers, dropped its claim for a 10.5 percent pay increase and accepted an offer of 8 percent after the government's Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration intervened into the dispute. Similarly, the Chemical Workers Industrial Union waived its claim for a 10 percent increase, settling

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instead for 8.5 percent.

The struggles had become increasingly militant with chemical workers blocking petrol tankers from leaving oil terminals, drawing sharp criticism from government officials. In another incident, workers employed by the state-owned electricity company torched a building in protest over privatization plans.

The ANC government is relying on the unions to contain worker militancy as it moves to implement the demands of big business. Strike activity has sharply declined since the ANC came to power in 1994. Approximately 650,000 working days were lost last year due to strikes, compared to 9 million in 1987 under the old apartheid regime. Yet the wages and conditions of workers remains largely unchanged.

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Unions try to end Kenyan bank strike

The Kenya Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU) has stepped in to end a two-week-long strike by 1,200 bank workers. The strike has closed 63 banks and other financial institutions. The Union of Commercial, Food and Allied Workers (UCFAW) called in the umbrella union organization after workers refused the UCFAW's demand that they return to work.

The workers are striking to oppose the move by the government of President Daniel Arap Moi to impose a new tax on staff loans. A strike over the same issue brought the banking industry to a standstill in February and March, but was called off when the government suspended the tax.

The spokesman for the All Bank Workers Shop Stewards said the strikers would only return to work if the tax were withdrawn and if the banks agreed to meet other minimal conditions. These include the withdrawal of dismissal letters served on strikers, no victimizations and no attempt to force workers to reapply for their positions.

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Asia

Indonesian rail car workers strike

Rail car manufacturing workers at the PT Industri Kereta Api plant in the Madium, East Java, are striking against the company's practice of maintaining workers as temporary laborers for years, and to demand an increase in wages to compensate for the sharply rising cost of living in Indonesia.

Many employees have worked for the company for five to eight years, but are unsure of what their working status is. "We are workers with registration numbers only, even though we have passed the employee recruitment test," one temporary worker said.

The workers manufacture paint, and finish and fit freight and passenger cars with electronic components for Asian and world markets. One permanent worker said wages were another major factor in the strike. He receives 210,000 rupiah a month (around US$2.30).

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Korean union caves in to Hyundai's demands for layoffs

The Korean Metal Workers union announced Friday that it would accept a "minimum level of layoffs" at Hyundai. The concession was a major climb down by the union, offered to end the month-long strike by militant workers who opposed the elimination of any jobs by the nation's largest automaker. When 26,000 workers struck July 20 the union insisted it would never accept a "single worker laid off."

Some 5,000 workers and their families have been occupying Hyundai's main plant at Ulsan, southeast of Seoul, for a month. The government of President Kim Dae Jung had declared the strike illegal and mobilized 15,000 riot police, backed by helicopters, bulldozers and tear gas, to attack the protesters. Tensions escalated this week after police attempted to forcefully remove the workers and were driven back by workers armed with metal pipes.

In talks that continued off and on through the night, the union agreed to a government proposal calling for between 250 and 300 workers to be dismissed, approximately half the number the company was seeking. Mediators said management and the union were still far apart on what to do with the remaining workers the company originally wanted to fire.

Major employers' organizations, including the Korea Employers Federation, urged Hyundai not to give in to outside pressure. In a joint statement they accused the government of siding with Hyundai union leaders, who were being sought by police on charges of organizing illegal strikes.

Hyundai Motors, a key subsidiary of the giant Hyundai group, is the first major business to impose mass layoffs since the legislature ended lifetime employment guarantees. South Korean business and the government want to attract foreign investors back by creating a more "flexible labor market." This was one of the key reforms agreed to by President Kim Dae Jung in exchange for a $58 billion bailout of its economy by the International Monetary Fund in December.

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Australia and the South Pacific

Kodak Australia axes Melbourne jobs

Kodak Australia last week announced it would sack 50 workers from its Coburg factory in Melbourne. The company reported a 20 percent sales slump this year. Exports to Asia account for almost 80 percent of the company's manufactured products, including film, paper and photographic chemicals. A spokesman said the Asian downturn meant the use of film had "switched from an everyday item to a luxury."

attention. Nurses agreed to return to work at 7 a.m. Wednesday but have threatened further stoppages.

Prior to announcing the sackings Kodak cut overtime and reduced working hours in some operations from seven to five days.

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Nurses strike over staff cuts

Nurses employed at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney's second largest hospital, struck for 24 hours on Tuesday. The 1,200 nurses are fighting plans by the hospital board to eliminate another 166 nursing and auxiliary staff positions to slash costs by $10 million.

All elective surgery was canceled because of the strike, but nurses provided a skeleton staff to care for patients requiring urgent In recent months only 27 of the 77 nursing vacancies have been filled. The hospital has closed 64 beds, canceled 10 theatre sessions a week, and is moving to downgrade its services for children. A NSW Nurses Association representative said previous cuts had already created staff shortages and increased workloads, undermining patient care.

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Police action against Sydney warehouse strikers

Police, acting under the directions of the NSW Labor government, have stepped up their action against striking workers at two Davids Holdings warehouses in Sydney. Police have threatened to arrest any worker who even steps onto a roadway to seek to halt a delivery truck or a vehicle bringing in scabs. Already about 60 workers have been dismissed by the company for participating in picket lines.

Police are working in close collaboration with management. They have arrested workers, but not charged them, and handed their names to management. The company has then selectively targeted longtime workers and some with injuries for dismissal. The Labor government's support for this police operation was rubberstamped by a meeting of all state Labor MPs during the week.

The workers, who have manned picket lines for six weeks, also face provocations by security guards supplied by the same companies that were employed in the recent waterfront dispute. Guards have videotaped picket lines, taunted strikers and sought to thrust dismissal notices at them.

As part of global restructuring in the wholesale grocery industry, Davids, now a subsidiary of South African-based Metro Cash and Carry,

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is demanding sweeping changes to extend working hours, slash pay rates and casualise the workforce. In talks with National Union of Workers (NUW) officials, the company has slightly modified its proposals, but still wants its dismissals to stand, 35 percent of the workforce casualised in peak periods, and flat rate working hours extended to cover 6am to 7 pm. For this, it is offering a 6 percent pay rise over two years.

While police have escorted trucks and busloads of scabs through the warehouse gates, the NUW at state and federal levels, the ACTU and other unions have isolated the strikers by refusing to call solidarity action, even in the warehouse industry. The unions have left the dispute in the hands of the courts, where the company has obtained an injunction to allow vehicles to enter and leave the warehouses.

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Sydney Tunnel workers stop work

Maintenance and operational workers employed by Tunnel Holdings struck for 24 hours on Monday after the company pulled out of negotiations for a new work agreement with the Australian Workers Union. The workers maintain the Sydney Harbor Tunnel that carries motor traffic between the City and Sydney's northern suburbs.

The union rejected a company offer, saying the proposed agreement included "unacceptable roster changes and inadequate remuneration." The company has threatened to force workers onto individual contracts if they do not accept the deal.

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New Guinea bus drivers to form union

Over 600 Public Motor Vehicle drivers and crews in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, returned to work last week after striking for two days to protest working conditions and police harassment. The drivers incur big traffic fines when they are forced to drive unsafe vehicles because the owners refuse to carry out repairs.

The strike ended after Transport Minister Vincent Auali asked the police to stop their daily roadblocks and checks on PMV drivers. However, the police have ignored the call. A spokesman for the drivers said harassment was continuing and police had manhandled a driver earlier this week.

The drivers are planning a meeting to discuss the revival of the defunct PMV Drivers Association to press their demands.

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Europe and Russia

Oil and gas workers could join Russian general strike

Workers in the oil and gas industry in Russia could participate in the national strike being planned by the Russian Federation of Independent Trade Unions on October 7. On August 12 Lev Mironov, a leader of the oil and gas union, said, "The union's management believes it necessary ... to take an active part in the preparation and realisation of an all-Russia strike on October 7."

The union has 1.2 million members, and at its June conference made a number of demands on the Russian government. Mironov said that none of the demands--including freezing the debts of the industry, implementing a six-month moratorium on tax payments and overhauling the tax system--had been met. Many workers in the oil industry had not been paid for two to four months, while their counterparts in the gas industry had not received wages for three to five months.

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Miners end blockade of Trans-Siberian railway

Coal miner--who had blockaded the Trans-Siberian railway near the Urals city of Chelyabinsk for three weeks in a dispute had been over unpaid wages--ended their protest on August 12 following an agreement with the regional government.

The miners took action in demand of the 37 million roubles owed to them in back pay. The government is trying to discredit the strikers with an official "criminal" investigation into the Chelyabinsk dispute that has already seen the arrest and questioning of a leader of the Independent Union of Mineworkers.

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Turkish strikers at US air bases resist intimidation

1,400 civilian workers on strike at three US Air bases throughout Turkey are resisting attempts by military personnel to intimidate and break their strike. According to the Harb-Is trade union the US military authorities are using violence against the strikers.

On the second day of the strike workers had dogs set on them by US personnel. On July 24, after workers left a strike meeting, a US colonel insulted union representatives and waved a baseball bat. This provoked a mass protest by workers outside the base. On July 26, a group of US soldiers attacked a picket and punched him in the eye.

Harb-Is has had no support from US military officials in attempting prosecution of those involved in these violent assaults and threats. US authorities have built a field kitchen staffed by their own personnel. When workers tried to close it down, soldiers prevented them from doing so.

Pickets are photographed, insulted and threatened daily. A circular sent to all US personnel and dependants called for a boycott of local shops to turn the community against the strikers. The authorities began accusing the strikers of preventing them from leaving the air bases and denying milk to their children.

Harb-Is says it does not believe that US children are going without milk, but a representative of the union's women's committee would help to prevent this. Local shopkeepers have sent messages of support to the strikers

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Shipping company to sack 330 British and New Zealand workers

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) has threatened to ballot its seafaring members employed by the Dutch/Anglo owned P&O Nedlloyd shipping company. The firm is planning to replace all 300 of its British ratings staff and 30 New Zealand workers with Filipino workers.

P&O Nedlloyd said that it was necessary to employ cheap labor because of the "ruthlessly competitive" container shipping market. With the replacement of the British and New Zealand workers, the 750 non-officer work force of P&O Nedlloyd will be sourced from Asia.

The RMT has made no attempt to unite seafarers in different countries in a struggle for better wages and conditions. In the past the National Union of Seamen, now incorporated into the RMT, agreed to allow Asian workers to be employed on a lower wage rate provided the union was paid "compensation"--the notorious "Asian Levy." It has campaigned on the basis that the P&O Nedlloyd decision means the end of British employment in the deep-sea merchant fleet of the UK and worked alongside shipping employers on a government working group to ensure employment for British workers.

It is estimated that Asian workers earn half of the 15,000 a year paid to their British counterparts. Last year the company made a small profit of $25 million, despite a turnover of $4 billion and assets of $2 billion. P&O Nedlloyd estimates the cost cutting will save it several million dollars a year.

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Staff at York museums to take strike action

Staff at museums and art galleries in York voted unanimously to take strike action over the weekend Bank Holiday of August 28/31. Fifty-five workers are involved in the dispute at Castle Museum, Yorkshire Museum, City Art Gallery and the York Story Centre. The workers are striking in opposition to wide-ranging changes to their pay and conditions being proposed by the City of York Council. Proposals include a decrease in the hourly rate of pay, an end to enhanced payment for weekend work, requiring staff to work six out of seven weekends, a cut in overtime pay and a shorter working week.

Staff say that an attendant worker could lose between 2,856 to 3,250 a year--55 to 63 a week--if the proposals are accepted. This amounts to a

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20 percent loss in earnings and also impacts on pension benefits. Other workers could lose as much as 75 percent of their pay as a result of the deal.

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