

Workers struggles around the world: 29 August 1998

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Africa

Legal action over Namibian mine closures

A legal inquiry into the closure of Namibia's copper mining industry has moved to South Africa after hearings concluded last week in Windhoek, the Namibian capital. Up to 2,000 copper miners were fired last May when the South African-owned company, Goldfields SA, filed for insolvency and closed all four copper mines. The legal investigation, which has summoned current and past directors and managers of the company, is to establish whether Goldfields SA is guilty of criminal negligence for closing the mine.

Namibia, on Africa's southwest coast, is heavily dependent on mining for export earnings. Politically and economically dominated by South Africa, the closure of the country's copper mines has had a major impact on the economy.

Goldfields SA closed the mines without warning, claiming falling copper prices, the failure of a smelter project, increased costs, strike action and other factors had made its operations unprofitable. Over the objections of the Namibian government's Ministry of Mines and Energy and protests by the Mining Union of Namibia (MUN), the company was granted a provisional winding up order, saying it could not pay any of its creditors.

The MUN, which took strike action over wages last September, declared the company's insolvency claims were an attempt to smash the union. The union cited as evidence a sharp increase in Goldfields SA's operating profit, despite 45 million rand redundancy pay-outs to the sacked workers. The union has indicated that it could file legal claims for 100 million rand in unpaid pension contributions.

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Nigerian teachers strike over nonpayment of wages

Nigerian secondary school teachers from the state of Imo struck last week in protest over the nonpayment of wages and other entitlements by the state government. Government teachers have not been paid salaries for four months, vacation entitlements for four years or other entitlements by the state government.

The angry teachers, carrying placards denouncing the government, marched through the state capital last Tuesday. The government warned that primary teachers who joined the strike and demonstrations would do so at "his or her own risk". Teachers told local newspapers that their families faced starvation.

The demonstrations followed announcements by the Borno state government that it was planning to destroy up to 8,000 civil servants jobs in the next month. Wing Commander Lawal Haruna, the newly appointed state administrator, made the announcement two days after taking up his position. The Nigeria Labor Congress has threatened an indefinite strike over the job cuts. The Borno state government currently employs 35,000 public sector workers.

There are over 10 million officially unemployed in Nigeria with 1.5 million youth entering the work force each year. Two hundred thousand workers were sacked last year with 150,000 jobs destroyed between January and May of this year.

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The Americas

Troops used against Bolivian pipeline workers strike

Bolivian President Hugo Banzer dispatched troops Wednesday, August 26, breaking up a strike by 1,800 workers constructing a \$2 billion gas pipeline from Bolivia to Brazil. Ten union leaders in Santa Cruz representing the strikers launched a hunger strike to protest Banzer's action. "We will press on with the protest, starting with a hunger strike," said union leader Poly Villaroel.

The workers launched their strike on August 24, demanding an increase in pay. "[The workers] are well paid compared to other sectors, so their position was unjustifiable," Banzer told reporters. Banzer, a former military dictator, won elections last year as president.

Brazilian state-run Petrobras, Bolivian state-run YPFB, Royal Dutch/Shell and British Gas are all participating in the pipeline project being constructed by the US firm Brown and Root Murphy. The pipeline will run 2,000 kilometers and carry natural gas from Bolivia to Brazil. It is scheduled to be completed by December and operative in 1999.

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US West strike continues

Thirty-four thousand telephone workers, members of the Communication Workers of America, have been on strike for two weeks, reducing service throughout 13 western and Midwestern states. Negotiators for US West and the CWA were scheduled to return to the bargaining table after two sessions August 27 failed to end the first strike

in the company's 14-year history.

Workers are demanding improvements in wages and benefits, a reduction in mandatory overtime and the removal of the company's demand to peg wage increases to job performance. Management has used outside contractors, the Internet and other methods to undermine the effectiveness of the strike. It has also threatened to cut off medical benefits for all 34,000 workers.

From the beginning of the walkout, the company has implied that strikers may be involved in sabotaging company property. On August 28 US West spokesman David Beigie said investigators had determined a construction crew was responsible for cutting a phone cable the day before that led to an outage in 911 service in Elbert County, south of Denver. The outage slowed efforts to save the life of a 9-month-old boy who stopped breathing.

CWA officials have filed an unfair labor practices charge over the company's threat to cut off health care coverage to strikers. At the same time, the CWA officials have attempted to interject American chauvinism into the struggle, claiming that some of contractors the company is using are illegal aliens. Union officials said they have told the US Immigration and Naturalization Service and Labor Department that US West is recruiting illegal workers from Canada.

Meanwhile, members of a second union warned they may strike next week unless they reach a new contract agreement. Bargaining teams for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in Montana and US West have yet to agree on wages, pensions, a performance-pay plan and healthcare benefits, a union spokesman said.

In Connecticut, 6,300 CWA workers are continuing their strike against Southern New England Telephone. They are pressing their demands for parity wages and benefits with other workers in the industry.

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Air Canada strike deadline

Pilots at Air Canada are set to strike midnight Tuesday unless the country's largest airline agrees to a new contract. Two thousand one hundred pilots are seeking improvements in pay and working conditions from the Montreal-based company. Last month, 97 percent of the pilots voted to authorize the union to call a strike. The deadline was set after Labor Minister Lawrence MacAuley released both sides from conciliation efforts.

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Survey shows 8 million US workers laid off in 1995-97

A survey by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that 8 million US workers were thrown out of their jobs between 1995 and 1997. One out of every fifteen adult jobholders was affected by corporate downsizing. While the total number of those laid off was slightly lower than 8.4 million workers who lost their jobs in the previous three years, the rate of job cuts is still greater than in the late 1980s, the last period of sustained "economic recovery."

Twenty-four percent of the full-time displaced workers who found new full-time jobs suffered a wage cut of 20 percent or more, according to the report. The survey also showed that blue-collar workers were more likely to be laid off, with one of every 20 losing their jobs in the latest three-year period. In the last three years, however, the layoff rate among manufacturing workers declined slightly, while that for service workers edged up.

In the last week alone, aircraft manufacturer Northrup-Grumman announced the layoff of 8,000 workers, and Harnishchfeger Industries, which makes machinery used in the production of wood pulp and paper, said it will cut 3,100 jobs, or 20 percent of its work force, because a glut of paper has reduced demand for its products.

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Asia

Thai teachers jobs to be destroyed

About 70,000 primary teachers jobs in Thailand are expected to be eliminated at the end of this year as the government implements cuts demanded under the so-called economic rescue package negotiated with the Asian Development Bank.

The National Education Commission (NEC) announced the job cuts in a report released August 26. The government has claimed that 80 percent of the job losses will be affected through early retirements.

NEC Secretary General Rung Kaewdaeng warned that many of the existing 114 training colleges would be closed and that plans to open 5 new teacher training colleges would be dropped. More than 30,000 primary teachers graduate from training college each year. The vast majority will not be employed.

The government's announcement came only 10 days after the Bangkok Bank of Commerce announced it would close by November 30, sacking almost 5,400 bank workers.

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Australia and the South Pacific

Warehouse strike ends with nothing resolved

Striking warehouse workers at Davids Holdings in Sydney returned to work on Friday on the recommendation of their union, but the company is still demanding sweeping casualisation of the workforce and other cuts in conditions.

The National Union of Workers (NUW) obtained an order in the Federal Court providing for temporary reinstatement of more than 50 workers dismissed by the company for picketing during the two-month strike. In return, the NUW pledged to get a resumption of work by 3pm on Friday and that it would prevent further industrial action over a new enterprise agreement.

Davids management has modified some of its original demands on working hours but still wants half the workforce to be casualised, paving the way for the destruction of all basic rights and conditions. It is also insisting on drastic cuts to fork lift allowances.

In addition, under the court injunction there is no guarantee that the dismissed workers will be reinstated permanently. The company argued in the court that all the dismissals should stand, pending the outcome of the talks with the union.

Davids, now owned by South African-based Metro Cash and Carry, is spearheading a new drive to casualise the warehouse industry. Driven on by a disastrous slide in its share values in Australia and South Africa, it is restructuring its grocery wholesale and retail operations to compete with larger chains.

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Public transport safety rundown threatens lives

A recent Melbourne court case has revealed that the paralysis of an assistant train driver in a transport accident in 1995 was the direct result of unsafe work practices by the Public Transport Commission (PTC).

Thirty-seven-year-old assistant train driver, Luciano Scobogna, was severely injured when his head smashed into a signal post at West Footscray on February 8, 1995. The accident was caused after he was ordered to check for malfunctioning brakes by looking out the window of the moving train. Drivers, following the removal of guards from trains, are now expected to lean out of the locomotive to look for sticking brakes on train carriages.

The Scobogna case has revealed that the signal post which hit his head was 23 centimeters closer to the track than demanded by the PTC's own standards. A postaccident investigation on all structures bordering railway tracks found 757 signals, fences, trees and bridges and other items infringing clearance standards.

Prior to this case the PTC has been responsible for four workplace deaths in five years, with over 11 criminal convictions and numerous breaches of the Occupational Health and Safety Act. The maximum the PTC can be fined for health and safety violations is \$40,000.

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Striking Papua New Guinea academics defy order

Striking members of PNG's National Academic Staff Association (NASA), who are seeking wage parity with expatriate lecturers, have been ordered by the Industrial Arbitration Tribunal to end a six-day strike they began August 21. The strike involves 140 national lecturers, as well tutors from the University of PNG, Waigani campus and the Taurama medical faculty. The striking lecturers have established protest tents outside the University of PNG's University Club.

The academics are demanding a special increase to reduce the disparity between national and expatriate pay, as well as better security and amenities on the campus. Excluding airfares for expatriate lecturers and their families, there is more than a A\$40,000 difference between the lecturers' total annual payments. Expatriate lecturers are provided with a special subsidy for their children's school fees as well as exchange rate stabilization payments.

NASA officials have said they will defy the back-to-work order. They declared that PNG's Arbitration Tribunal does not have the power to order an end to the strike.

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Europe

Truck drivers to blockade borders throughout Europe

Truck drivers in several European countries are to hold 24-hour blockades of a number of border crossings on September 8. The blockades are part of a day of action organized by the International Transport Federation (ITF) and the European Federation of Transport Unions.

The protest is over drivers' demand to decrease the working week to 48 hours and for the introduction of regulations for the haulage industry on a European-wide basis. The borders between France/Luxembourg, France/Germany, France/Spain and others will be hit by the action. One of the trade unions involved in the dispute is the French Democratic Confederation of Labour. Michel Fleuret, a CFDT co-ordinator of the September 8 action, said the border between France and Luxembourg will feature a slowdown, but the one between Strasbourg and Germany will block traffic completely."

The International Transport Federation issued a statement in support of the proposed action on the basis that it is necessary to "reestablish a relationship with the government characterized by civilized dialogue rather than provocative confrontation."

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Romanian miners strike as unions demand more restructuring

More than 50,000 Romanian miners in the coal, copper and uranium industries took strike action for 24 hours on August 24. The strike was called by the National Confederation of Miners Trade Unions (CNCSMR) to pressure the government into continuing the restructuring program it began last year.

The main elements of the program were a system of voluntary redundancies, which some 95,000 miners took up, and the closure of a number of mines deemed unprofitable. The redundancy program was brought to a virtual halt earlier this year and other promises such as new employment opportunities for redundant miners have not materialized.

Ioan Feurdean, the secretary of CNCSMR, said, "We are aware of the need for a restructuring of the sector and agree with the plans. But so far nothing has happened apart from last year's layoffs."

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Strike supports privatisation of Polish defense industry

Workers at 30 Polish defence firms held a one-hour strike August 24 as unions called on the government to implement a program to privatize 95 percent of the defense industry. The government plans to implement the privatizations by 2001. The unions have said that this timetable is too slow to prevent the bankruptcy of large parts of the industry, and have given the government two weeks to present proposals on the privatizations. The

unions have said that if the government continues to delay the privatization, a general strike of workers in the defense industry will be called.

The government scheme is due to be discussed next month. It entails the creation of a National Defense Industry Fund, which would have shares of the majority of defense firms allocated to it. The total debt in the 45 companies involved in the scheme is estimated at \$350 million. The Defense Ministry has announced that more than 12 companies face bankruptcy in the near future.

A deputy head of a union at the WSK Mielec aircraft factory told the PAP news agency, "Without government help the cradle of Poland's aviation industry may be the first to face bankruptcy."

In the last 10 years nearly half of all defense firms have closed, with the loss tens of thousands of jobs following the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact to which Poland was a major arms supplier.

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Avesta steel to sack 1,000 worldwide

Avesta Sheffield, a subsidiary of British steel, is to sack 1,000 of its work force worldwide. Avesta employs 2,000 workers in Britain and 7,600 overseas. The company has reported large financial losses for the last year. The steelworkers union in Britain, the ISTC, have said that as many as 350 jobs could be lost in Britain. It responded to the announcement by stating that all jobs should be lost at the companies non-British locations. ISTC Secretary Keith Brookman said, "It is well known that the work force in Sheffield have been at the forefront of development. They have enhanced productivity levels that are the envy of other steel producers."

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Engineering firm sacks 100 workers in Northeast England

One hundred workers at the Bonas Machine Company in Gateshead, in the Northeast of England, are to be made redundant. The firm manufactures industrial weaving machines and exports 90 percent of its goods. In 1995 Bonas won the award of "Britain's best factory" in a competition and was described as an exemplary model. With the job losses, one-third of the work force will be cut. Bonas cited the strong value of the pound for the last 18 months as the reason for the redundancies, as it had weakened the company's position against its rivals. In the last three weeks around 3,000 job losses have been announced in the Northeast.

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