

Workers struggles around the world 12 September 1998

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Africa

March by South African municipal workers

Thousands of municipal workers marched through Johannesburg city center on Tuesday to protest the refusal of the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council to collect service charges amounting to millions of rand from big business. The council is refusing to grant workers a 4 percent pay increase, claiming that it has no money as the companies refuse to pay their debts.

They were also concerned that the council had not filled vacant positions, planned to privatize services and use contract labor. The march involved bus drivers, garbage collection and library workers, who carried placards reading "cost cutting costs lives" and "no work, no pay and no votes."

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The Americas

Struggle of Venezuelan doctors escalates

Public sector doctors in Caracas are threatening to spread their strike throughout Venezuela in the wake of the government's firing of nearly the entire staff of a public hospital. Two hundred fifty doctors at the Lidice public hospital were fired September 6 after refusing to return to work.

Some 1,600 of Caracas's 2,000 doctors are demanding monthly wages be raised from \$380 to \$1,030. The government has retorted that doctors received substantial wage increases last year. Most of the city's hospitals have shut down intensive care units and

cancelled prenatal examinations along with other routine services.

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Crisis in Ecuador as oil workers strike

Oil workers struck two of Ecuador's three refineries threatening an oil shortage to the impoverished Latin American nation. Already hampered by low oil prices, Ecuador has been further hit by the Asian economic crisis, as that region constitutes the main source of the country's oil exports, not to mention its other leading exports of bananas and shrimp. Exports have fallen by \$428 million in the first half of 1998.

The government's budget has also been strained by El Nino-driven floods that caused extensive damage to the nation's Pacific coast. The new president, Jamil Mahuad, has promised fiscal austerity in dealing with the crisis.

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Michigan sugar workers locked out

More than 450 year-round and seasonal employees remain locked out by one of Michigan's largest sugar producers after overwhelmingly rejecting the company's proposed contract August 7. Upon notification of the contract rejection Michigan Sugar immediately locked the gates of its plants in Caro, Carrollton, Crosswell and Sepewaing, Michigan.

The workers, members of the American Federation of Grain Millers, are walking the picket line to demand improved health and safety, wages and pensions. Michigan Sugar was purchased last year by Imperial Holly Corporation, giving the company control of about one-third of the US sugar market. Management is using nonunion strikebreakers.

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Australia and Papua New Guinea

Australian construction union abandons strike

A national strike by 200,000 construction workers scheduled for this week was called off at the last minute by the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union.

The strike had been called to press the federal government to withdraw new rule changes that would classify many construction workers as seasonal contract workers. They would have to wait up to six months after building projects concluded before being eligible to receive unemployment benefits.

The union's national secretary John Sutton said that he had been given an assurance that building workers covered by national work agreements would be unaffected. Sutton claimed to have won a victory.

However, a spokesman for the Minister for Social Security said,

"there has been no back-down as far as the government is concerned." He said no decision could be taken on the controversial issue because cabinet only acted as a "caretaker government" during the present election period.

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Jobs to be axed at Compaq

The computer company Compaq has announced plans to cut 225 jobs from its 3,000-strong Australian work force by the end of September. The rationalization is part of a global merger with Digital.

The jobs will go from administration, finance, human resources, product sales and management, manufacturing and logistics. The merger could eventually lead to job losses as high as 5,000 worldwide.

Last June Compaq and Digital foreshadowed a cut of 500 manufacturing jobs in operations in Scotland within six months. Manufacturing plants are to be closed in Sterling and computer production in Irvine will be transferred to a plant in Erskine.

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Papua New Guinea air traffic controllers to strike

Air traffic controllers from seven locations throughout Papua New Guinea have called a two-hour stop work meeting over unpaid on-call and meal allowances dating back over two years. The stoppage would involve controllers from Lae, Goroka, Mt. Hagen, Wewak, Madang, Rabaul and Port Moresby.

The strike will affect only domestic flights as international flights will be monitored from Australia by Air Services Australia.

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Europe and Russia

Siberian teachers strike over pay arrears

Almost 11,000 teachers have begun a three-day strike in protest at the failure of the government to pay wages. Schools in Siberia, in the east of Russia, closed after the first day of the new school year, September 1, known as Knowledge Day. A strike also took place on Russia's Pacific coast.

Teachers in the Vladivostok region have boycotted Knowledge Day events and are suspending classes until September 4. If the delays in payment are not resolved, further industrial action is promised. Teachers' union leader Raisa Shabanova said, "teachers have been driven to such an extreme measure by a very hard financial situation."

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Russian nuclear, coal and energy workers demand back wages

Workers in the nuclear power industry staged a warning strike on September 7 in protest over unpaid wages. Two hundred representatives from nuclear power plants in Yekaterinburg, Arzamas and Chelyabinsk protested on September 8 outside the Ministry of Atomic Energy in Moscow. Miners' strikes are spreading throughout the Vorkuta region. On September 8, 36 workers at a heat and energy plant joined 11 fellow workers on hunger strike protesting against six months' wage arrears. The original 11 had already been on hunger strike for four days.

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French truck drivers protest

On September 8, truck drivers in France launched warning

blockades at a series of border crossings. Long tailbacks of lorries hit the Luxembourg border and minor delays were felt at channel ports. Traffic at the northern border of Portugal was said to be at a standstill, even though the main European truckers union, the FST, had not called for blockades.

The truckers' blockade was part of an international day of action organized by the FST and the International Transport Workers Federation to highlight long working hours and driver fatigue. Demonstrations were also due in Latin America and India, Germany, Spain, Italy and Belgium. Truckers are demanding a reduction of the working week to 48 hours. At the moment, transport workers are excluded from the European Union limit on the working week to 48 hours.

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Railway maintenance workers overtime ban

Workers at two private rail maintenance companies in Britain are to ban overtime in a long running dispute over pay and working hours. Workers at Jarvis and Centrac will begin the ban on overtime this weekend, the busiest time for track repairs. After a series of weeklong strikes and mass meetings of track workers employed by all the maintenance companies, the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) organized separate meetings on a company basis. After unofficial strikes and attacks on union officials, the RMT began to sign separate deals with the different companies to demobilize maintenance workers.

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Finnish forestry wardens strike

On Tuesday, the Finnish Foresters' Union, representing 3,000 white-collar forest workers, threatened to join striking forestry wardens on Friday in solidarity. Over 1,000 of their colleagues, paid by the state but hired out to private contractors, are demanding a 10 percent wage increase.

Negotiations began last Wednesday, but forestry management did not expect a quick resolution of the wardens' strike. "The strike will affect all factories as this group of people takes care of the whole of wood maintenance in Finland," said Pekka Tiilila, a forest manager at UPM-Kymmene. "If the big paper factories have to halt following the lack of wood, everybody understands this means a lot of money."



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