Workers struggles around the world

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and others to contribute to this weekly feature by sending information to editor@wsws.org

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The Americas

Colombian government workers strike against austerity

The Colombian government of Andres Pastrana threatened October 8 to declare the two-day-old strike by 650,000 public sector workers illegal. The move came as the country's 2,300 customs workers voted to join the indefinite strike which will delay exports of coffee, sugar and oil.

Doctors, teachers, oil workers, telecommunications workers and justice officials staged noisy pickets shutting down government facilities and services and closing schools for 7 million students. Oil workers have cut the supply of gas, diesel and kerosene to cities by 50 percent. In downtown Bogota, Colombia's capital, riot police fired water cannon and tear gas against telecommunications workers. As of yet, mass demonstrations have not been organized.

Declaring the strike illegal "is a possibility offered to us by the law, and the government will have to resort to that if the drop in public sector activity persists," Labor Minister Hernando Yepes said. Wilson Borja, who heads the main public sector union FENALTRASE, responded, "Such a decision would only make this conflict more radical. But if the government wants war it will get war." Luis Eduardo Garzon, head of the Unitary Workers' Federation (CUT), the country's largest labor federation, added, "If the people are not granted channels of protest, then this will end in violence." "It's preferable to protest in the way we are doing now rather than to protest in other ways."

The Unitary Workers Federation launched the strike movement against a government austerity program that aimed to cap wage increases at 14 percent and expand the range of products and services subject to Colombia's 16 percent value-added tax. Workers have a 110-point bargaining program that includes an 18 percent wage increase for the year 1999.

Colombia began devaluing its currency, the peso, beginning in September after spending $1.5 billion during 1998 to prop up the currency. On October 9 a new reserve requirement for commercial banks will cut the amount required for deposit with the central bank from 5 percent to 3 percent, making available to the financial system some 690 billion pesos of additional liquidity.

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Kaiser Aluminum initiates strike-breaking operations

Kaiser Aluminum announced October 5 that it has started to bring its five struck plants back into production with a scab work force. "We have a responsibility to our customers, employees and shareholders to keep our operations running," a company spokesman declared. No talks are scheduled as the strike continues into its second week.

The Gramarcy, Louisiana aluminum refinery is currently running at 93 percent of annual capacity. Company officials expect the Trentwood, Washington sheet and plate mill to be running at full capacity within a month. The Tacoma and Mead plants in Washington are to be running at about 75 percent.

Some 3,000 members of the United Steelworkers union walked off the job September 30 over pay, benefits, job security and other issues. Company and union officials are scheduled to meet October 9.

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Talks break off in Kentucky aluminum strike

Company and union officials broke off talks October 2 in the three-month-old strike at Southwire Co. aluminum smelter in Hawesville, Kentucky. In two days of talks the union offered concessions on subcontracting, overtime and premium pay and holidays. But Southwire is sticking to its final offer made back at the beginning of July.

The United Steelworkers union is attempting to obtain job guarantees to protect production and maintenance workers from layoffs. "We firmly maintain we have a right to manage our business and respond to changing market conditions," a company spokesman responded.

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General Motors and the UAW to push for team manufacturing

General Motors Corp. will impose team-style manufacturing at its Tonawanda Powertrain engine plant located in western New York. The team concept would be patterned after the Saturn plant operation. This method of production could threaten 1,000 of the facility's 4,000 union jobs. In about three weeks the workers will vote on whether or not to amend the Local 774 union contract.

UAW Area Director Kevin J. Donovan stated, "Nothing's going to happen unless the parties come to some equitable agreement." Team manufacturing has already been approved for the production of the new four-cylinder L850 engine to begin next year. The company indicates team manufacturing will enhance the plant's ability to win new products to replace aging ones.

GM plans to drop two of its engine lines within the next four years--the 4.3 liter, six-cylinder and the 3.1 liter, six-cylinder by the year 2002. The "team" concept reduces the need to pay for specialized help to relieve workers or bring workers in from other shifts because all team members

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will be able to perform all the tasks for a particular job. The Harbour Report analysis places the plant 26 percent behind the productivity of Ford's Lima, Ohio engine plant. The plant has also attempted to hire new workers at a much lower rate of pay and set the maximum pay increments well below current union pay rates.

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Basketball team owners' lockout cancels preseason

The National Basketball Association canceled its entire 114-game preseason, and is considering the postponement of regular season play because of the ongoing dispute between players and team owners. The impasse began on July 1 when the owners locked the players out after the expiration of their collective bargaining agreement. The players want to keep their rights to earn unlimited salaries through free agency, while the owners want to put a cap on players' salaries.

Last year professional basketball teams received more than $2 billion in revenue and turned over 57 percent to players. Negotiations are stalled and the start of the new season on November 3 is in doubt. Unlike professional baseball, football and hockey, the NBA has never lost a regular season game to a labor dispute.

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Philippine company refuses to drop charges against child arrested on picket line

Paper Industry Corp. of the Philippines, the country's largest paper manufacturer, has refused to drop charges of "grave coercion" against a five-year-old girl, Junalyn Baste, who was arrested with her parents shortly after company guards and police stormed a picket line erected by workers and their supporters on May 27.

Following the attack the company filed charges against Junalyn and her parents, who were then arrested and jailed. Seven other children, aged between one and six, were jailed with their parents.

The workers had formed the picket line and set up makeshift tents on January 11 to fight against the company's violations of their collective bargaining agreement. A report by the Diocesan Labor Program in the Tandang Diocese said the workers were arrested without warrants and their tents and barricades dismantled.

After spending four months in jail they were released temporarily on "humanitarian grounds" under an agreement reached between lawyers representing the company and unions. The company has refused to drop the charges even though the unions have agreed to remove the picket and cease strike action. No dates have been set for the charges to be heard.

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Migrant workers face wage cuts in Hong Kong

The Asian Migrant Coordinating Body, representing Hong Kong's estimated 178,000 migrant domestic helpers, last week denounced an employers' proposal to slash the minimum wage. The Hong Kong Employers Association is demanding that the government cut the $493 per month wage for domestic workers by up to 35 percent.

A spokesman for the migrant body said workers were being told to accept the wage reduction or face unemployment. "We say this is nothing more than blackmail," he said. "We know there is a crisis, but this should not be used as an excuse to attack the basic rights of Hong Kong people and migrant workers."

Migrant domestic helpers are already among the lowest paid workers in Hong Kong.

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Korean retail workers push for back pay

The Shinsegae Department Store chain in Korea is attempting to make workers forgo any claim to back pay or related wages owed them since early last year when the company cut bonus payments by 350 percent. The bonus was part of the regular wage and made up a large portion of take-home pay. The back pay owed totals over 10 billion won.

The store workers were pressured to sign a new contract last September, but the company annulled it when the workers threatened to take collective industrial action. Employees made redundant since the introduction of the contract are preparing a lawsuit to push for the payment of back pay and severance entitlements.

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Africa

Zambian copper miners strike

Over 6,000 copper miners at the Roan Antelope Mining Corporation at Luanshya in Zambia have gone on strike to demand the payment of housing allowances owed to them by the Binani Group of Companies.

The strike was called after a go-slow campaign by miners failed to move the company from its position. The allowances have not been paid since the mine was privatized and handed over to Binani over 11 months ago.

The company has instituted a wider cost-cutting program. It has ordered that the township's clinics, previously run by the government-owned Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines, close services at 4 p.m., forcing patients, including pregnant women, to walk for miles to seek medical attention at other centers. A miners' spokesman said Binani had "brought untold suffering to the mining town."

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South African auto strike called off

The National Union of Metal Workers has called off a five-week-long strike by South African auto workers. The 50,000 workers returned to work October 5 after the union struck a deal to accept a 4.5 percent wage increase, far below the raise sought by the striking workers.

The workers, employed in the country's 18,000 auto parts factories, body shops, component firms and car dealerships went on strike September 1 demanding a wage increase of between 12 and 18 percent. The union has agreed to participate in a forum with the auto employers to oversee the "restructuring and transformation" of the industry.

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South African miners strike Iscor

Seven thousand workers belonging to the National Union of Miners and the National Union of Metal Workers have downed tools at Iscor at Vanderbilojpark in Gauteng. Workers are asking for a 30 percent bonus and have adopted a no-bonus, no-work policy. The strike was triggered by managers giving themselves bonuses of nine million rand.

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Nigeria government workers strike

Public servants in Lagos are beginning an indefinite strike against the new military ruler, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, after the state government fired Ayodele Akele, the chief of the Council of Industrial Unions. Akele, a member of two organizations opposing military rule, had called for an increase in the pay for civil servants. A Nigerian human rights group criticized the dismissal as a gross violation of the workers' rights and unnecessary abuse of power.

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Australia

Jobs go in South Australian TV restructure

Following its $98 million takeover of Channel Nine's Adelaide television station, Southern Cross Broadcasting (SCB) has announced a major restructuring and will sack a third of the work force. The company claims that costs at Channel 9 are 50 percent higher than its rival Channel 7.

Managing director Tony Bell said the company would slash full-time staff positions from 175 to 111 and reduce casual positions by an undisclosed amount. Most of the job cuts will be from technical staff. All non-core production work will be outsourced.

SCB owns television stations in Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory.

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Finance sector jobs threatened

The Finance Sector Union says that up to 3,300 workers' jobs will be lost as a result of mergers and takeovers within the insurance and finance industry, reducing the overall workforce in the insurance sector from 21,250 to 17,950. The estimation is based on information resulting from current negotiations and the results of previous mergers.

A merger between AMP and GIO Australia could result in the loss of over 1,000 jobs with another 1,000 threatened when Colonial takes over the Australian operations of Prudential and General later this year. Nearly 300 jobs will go when HIH Winterthur buys out FAI Insurance. More will be destroyed in a planned merger between Commercial Union and New Zealand Insurance. National Mutual has announced that it is preparing to cut its work force by 800.

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Europe and Russia

Ukrainian miners killed in methane explosion

Four miners were killed in a methane explosion at the pit near Yenakeyevo, in the Donbass coalfield. Throughout the former USSR, 260 miners have been killed in the first eight months of 1998, compared with 290 for all of last year. Sixty-three miners were killed in one explosion in northeastern Ukraine.

Miners are working in pits with equipment dating from the turn of the century. They have not been paid for months and their families are living at near starvation levels. Russian President Boris Yeltsin's solution to this growing crisis in the coalfields has been to draw up a plan with the World Bank to close the majority of the mines.

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British electricians threaten overtime ban on the Jubilee Line Millennium Link

Electricians working to complete the underground link to the Millennium Dome by the year 2000 are refusing to work more than the 48 hours laid down in the European Working Time Directive. Up to now they have been working a 66-hour week and are demanding a 14 percent pay increase in return for signing a waiver on the European ruling.

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Computer chipmaker laying off hundreds at Scottish plant

National Semiconductor will close part of a plant in Scotland and lay off 600 of its 1,000 workers because of slumping demand for computer chips. The Santa Clara, California-based company also announced its intention to find a new buyer for its operations in Greenock, near Glasgow.

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