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 e-mailing information to editor@wsws.org

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The Americas

Colombian general strike ends with no gains for workers

Union leaders called an end to the 21-day strike by 650,000 public sector workers October 27 after accepting a deal with the government which was brokered by the Catholic Church and produced no gains.

In the biggest strike movement in 20 years, during which eight union officials were murdered by right-wing paramilitary forces, the unions obtained a 15 percent wage increase for 1999, 1 percentage point higher than the 14 percent offered by the government at the beginning of the strike. Colombian finance minister Juan Camilo Restrepo said the agreement would cost $79.8 million in extra wages for an estimated 700,000 state employees. The strike was launched against the austerity measures introduced by President Andres Pastrana that would weigh heaviest on the working class. The agreement leaves Pastrana's cost-cutting package intact.

"The cost of this deal is minimal compared to the original demands put forward by workers," declared Restrepo. "The cost is basically that of bringing the salary in line with the inflation forecast."

The most union officials could say had been gained were vague "social pledges" from the government. Wilson Borja, head of the main public sector union FENALTRASE, said "There's a long way to go and if we can't [succeed], then other sectors will.... The government still does not understand that the model will have to change," he added.

Borja's reference to "others" refers to the negotiations Pastrana will be holding with the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) next month. The union believes FARC will raise many of the same issues it had raised during the public sector strike.

Once the strike was concluded, Pastrana climbed aboard a jet and headed to Washington, DC where he was promised $280 million in new military aid by President Clinton, allegedly to help fight drug trafficking. The agreement, which follows Congress's approval of $200 million in military aid last week, makes Colombia the biggest recipient of such funding in Latin America. The Colombian military, along with US troops stationed there, have been waging a counterinsurgency operation aimed at terrorizing the working masses.

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Volvo improves severance pay to end Nova Scotia job action

The Canadian Auto Workers ended job action at Volvo's Halifax, Nova Scotia, plant October 25, after the Swedish-based automaker agreed to modest improvements in severance pay and pension benefits.

Under the agreement Volvo will proceed, as originally planned, with the closure of its 35-year-old kit assembly plant in Halifax December 18. The closure will put 223 production, office and managerial workers out of work.

From the morning of Wednesday, October 21, until Saturday, October 24 about 30 CAW members conducted a sit-in at the Volvo plant to press for better severance pay. For more than 24 hours they continued the sit-in in defiance of a provincial labor relations board ruling that it was illegal, then joined other CAW Local 720 members in blockading the plant's main gates.

Initially, Volvo reneged on its pledge to negotiate with CAW officials if they brought the sit-in to a timely end, claiming that it feared for the safety of management personnel.

But when negotiations did begin, an agreement was reached quickly. Volvo agreed to increase the maximum severance pay for high seniority workers by $10,000 to $45,000 and to raise the maximum monthly pension benefit by $490 per month to $1,260.

For the CAW there was never any question of challenging Volvo's decision to close the plant. Rather the CAW sought to convince the automaker it could make its Halifax operations more profitable, and worked with an auto parts supplier to put together a business proposition

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along these lines.

Volvo rejected the plan, however, causing a chagrined CAW President Buzz Hargrove to complain that a visit to Volvo headquarters in Stockholm by CAW officials and representatives of Mackie Automotive Systems had been a waste of time: "They ... [had] made up their minds on a worldwide strategy and nothing is going to change it."

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Striking Canadian paper workers to vote on company offer

The leadership of the Canadian, Energy and Paperworkers union (CEP) has ordered the 4,000 workers on strike against Abitibi-Consolidated's operations in eastern Canada to vote on the company's latest contract offer, even while terming that offer unacceptable.

The vote is the latest in a series of retreats by the CEP leadership during the course of the four-and-a-half-month-long strike. In July, leaders of the two CEP locals at Abitibi's Trois-Rivires, Quebec plant broke ranks with the strike and engineered a return to work, after the company claimed the plant's closure was imminent. Then in September the union ceded to Abitibi's main demand and agreed to negotiate work rules and schedules on a plant-by-plant basis.

Negotiations on a master agreement covering wages and benefits broke off October 23 because the company continued to insist on a six-year contract.

According to many industry analysts, Abitibi-Consolidated, the largest newsprint manufacturer in the world, is quite prepared to weather a long strike affecting only part of its operations. The strike is serving to boost newsprint prices, under conditions where the market has been badly affected by the slump in east Asia. The strike has shut down 10 Abitibi plants in Newfoundland, Quebec and Ontario.

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Canadian airport workers continue walkout

Five hundred twenty airport support workers at Toronto's Pearson International Airport are continuing the strike they began on October 2 to press for improved wages. Talks have collapsed and no new negotiations are planned. The strikers perform maintenance, direct aircraft on the aprons and service computers. The strikers' union, Public Service Alliance of Canada, contends that safety at the Toronto airport is being compromised by untrained managers being used as replacements.

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Phoenix orchestra musicians threaten to strike

Musicians in the Phoenix Symphony Orchestra are threatening to strike at midnight Saturday, just over a month into their nine-month season, unless orchestra managers agree to raise their base salary by about $20,000 over the next five years. The musicians in the US's sixth-largest city are the lowest paid among the nation's 40 full-time orchestras, according to the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians.

Management places the average salary of Phoenix orchestra members at $28,000 a year. The musicians are seeking to bring their salaries in line with the national average of $45,000 a year. At the current rate of pay many musicians cannot afford to keep up their craft. One musician said she spent half her yearly salary to get her cello fixed. Double bass player Jonathon Imsande said he shells out $580 a month on the installment plan for his $50,000 instrument.

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Teamsters strike ends at Anheuser-Busch in St. Louis

Striking Teamsters returned to work October 26, after three days on the picket line against Anhueser-Busch in St. Louis. Terms for ending the strike were not available.

The strike involved 65 members of IBT local 367 who work at the company's power plant. But the strike expanded when the 1,700 workers at Busch's main operations, also members of the Teamsters, refused to cross picket lines.

The IBT and Busch have been in negotiations involving 8,000 Teamsters at 12 plants across the country for about a year. Last month Busch declared an impasse had been reached and unilaterally implemented its contract offer. Teamsters overwhelmingly voted in March to launch a national strike, but IBT officials have merely called on Busch to continue negotiations.

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Second one-day strike by California nurses

Health care workers at Encino-Tarzana Regional Medical Center carried through their second one-day walkout October 23 to protest stalled talks with the unit's parent company, Tenet.

Service Employees International Union Local 535, which represents over 275 registered nurses, is involved in talks over issues of patient care, working conditions, overtime concessions and wages. Tenet is driving to establish a two-tier wage system at the Tarzana complex.

Joining the picket line were striking registered nurses from Midway Hospital and from Encino Hospital, a Tenet facility, where nurses recently won a union election and are seeking their first contract.

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Federal mediator seeks talks between steelworkers and Kaiser Aluminum

The United Steelworkers and Kaiser Aluminum officials are holding one-day meetings with a federal mediator aimed at resuming negotiations as the strike by 3,000 union workers enters its second month.

The Kaiser strike affects five plants nationwide and was called over disagreements on wages, benefits and work rules, as well as company plans to eliminate 400 jobs at various locations. Kaiser continues to operate its plants with salaried employees and strike-breakers.

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Philadelphia transit union obtains contract

Three months after the union membership voted to accept a so-called oral settlement with management, Transport Workers Union Local 234 obtained a written Memorandum of Agreement. It is anticipated that the 15-member board of the Southeast Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) will vote to accept the latest deal.

The 40-day strike of 5,500 workers, which shut down the fourth largest transportation system in the US, ended July 10 when the union leadership announced that it had reached an agreement with management. On July 24 the membership voted to accept the deal based on the union leadership's version of the settlement. However, with nothing in writing, management and the union leadership disagreed as to what were the actual terms of the handshake deal.

The most contentious issue during the strike was the use of part-timers. During the strike, union President Steve Brookens claimed that he would never accept management's demand. The Memorandum of Agreement stipulates that an arbitrator will decide if the transportation agency can hire 100 part-timers to drive small buses. Due to a sizeable budget deficit, SEPTA has been seeking to introduce part-timers to cut costs.

As had been verbally agreed, the contract includes a 3 percent annual wage hike starting mid-December for three years. This increase has already been paid for by the strikers through the money SEPTA saved by not paying wages during the strike. The agreement also includes a pension increase for the workers, but this will be paid for by lengthening the amount of time that it takes newly hired employees to reach top pay.

SEPTA negotiator David L. Cohen has claimed that the signed memorandum differs from what the union members voted on in some seven to ten provisions. Cohen has further stated that the major difference lies in a harsher disciplinary procedure for rule infractions, especially in the area of alcohol and drug examinations.

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Natural gas explosion kills seven workers in Louisiana

Seven workers were killed when a natural gas well exploded in

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Bryceland, Louisiana October 24. The explosion happened as the crew was attempting to bring the well into production in the Bienville Parish woods about 45 miles east of Shreveport. It burst into a roaring jet of flames that killed six workers at the scene. A seventh worker died later of burns at a Shreveport hospital., and an eighth remained hospitalized with burns.

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Workers strike Detroit auto supplier

Seventy workers carried out a two-week strike against John Johnson Co., a Detroit auto supply company. The workers make tarpaulins for semi-trailers and canvas tops for Chrysler Jeeps. The walkout by members of UAW Local 417 began October 12 and ended October 26. The UAW was seeking $1.70 in raises over three years. The workers' current base rate is $8.90 an hour and management offered $1.00 over three years. No details of the settlement were available.

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Northwest Airlines settles contracts with two smaller unions

Northwest Airlines has reached agreements with two of its smaller unions representing fewer than 300 workers between them. Members of the Aircraft Technical Support Association, representing 200 professionals who work as production planners, reliability analysts and in other jobs, were expected to sign a new six-year deal. NWA also reached an agreement with the Meteorologists Association which represents the 15 weather forecasters it employs.

The latter deal, also a six-year contract, includes an annual pay raise of 4 percent, followed at roughly one-year intervals by raises of 4 percent, 3 percent, 3 percent, 2 percent and 2 percent. It also reportedly includes a lump sum payment of $4,500, a no-layoff clause and a 50 percent increase in pension benefits.

Those terms are similar to those overwhelmingly rejected last August by members of the International Association of Machinists, the company's largest union representing 27,000 machinists, baggage handlers, ticket agents and ground crew workers. Workers are seeking to recoup large concessions they granted to the company in the beginning of the decade. The IAM has sought permission from the National Mediation Board to set a 30-day strike deadline. The NMB has thus far not granted the IAM's request.

On October 29 flight attendants, represented by the Teamsters union, held informational pickets at Detroit Metropolitan Airport and other NWA centers, protesting that they have no contract. No date has been set for mediated talks to begin. One flight attendant in Detroit held up his pay stub showing that he earned less than $13,000 last year.

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Airborne pilots protest firing

Pilots for Airborne Freight Corp. announced that they will not volunteer for overtime flights because of the firing of a pilot who refused to test fly an airborne jet for which he and his crew had no training. The pilots are members of the Airline Professional Association Teamsters Local 1224.

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Africa and the Middle East

Council workers riot in Zimbabwe

Last week more than 2,000 council workers went on strike for two days in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. Angered by the city council's refusal to pay wages, the workers held protests outside the office of Mayor Solomon Tawengwa. The strikers burned garbage, overturned cars and set fire to the Zimbabwe flag as paramilitary police deployed to protect government offices stood by.

The strike erupted when the council announced October 22 that the city had run out of money and could not pay wages. Yet the authorities are spending millions of dollars on building a mayoral mansion in one of the city's most affluent districts. Already over $47 million has gone into the project, but the cost is expected to rise to $55 million by the end of the year.

One worker said that he was angry because the money spent on mansions "was better spent on schools, hospitals and other services." There have also been strikes over the breakdown of essential services. In recent weeks, the local water supply was shut down when city officials failed to pay for pump maintenance services.

Tendering processes have allowed council officials to pass on lucrative contracts worth millions of dollars to family and close friends. The national government is deeply involved in the council corruption as it directly appoints most of the city officials.

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Palestinian journalists strike

Palestinian journalists in the Gaza Strip decided October 24 to go on strike to protest restrictions by the Palestinian Authority on their news coverage. The move came a day after Palestinian police detained a dozen journalists in Gaza City who were waiting to interview Sheik Ahmed Yassin, spiritual leader of the Islamic fundamentalist group Hamas, about the signing of a new Mideast peace deal.

The journalists were told, effective immediately, that they needed permission from the Palestinian Authority to cover events dealing with politics or security, thereby restricting access to both Palestinian officials and opposition figures like Yassin. All the detained journalists were forced to hand over their equipment, including mobile phones, tape recorders and cameras, and were also told to appear at police headquarters.

The Gaza City-based Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate said in a statement its members would not accept the restrictions and had decided to halt news coverage of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza in retaliation. The statement also called on the Palestinian security apparatus to stop any mistreatment of reporters, and asked that all international press groups pressure the Palestinian leadership to respect press freedom. Journalists also planned to hold a sit-in at the syndicate until the curbs were rescinded.

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Australia

Postal workers threaten strike action

Australia Post workers are threatening strike action over plans by management to bring in changes to work conditions. A Communication, Electrical, and Plumbers Union (CEPU) spokesman said management was attempting to include shift changes in a new work agreement that would severely disrupt the life of workers. The company also wanted to cut overtime benefits and reduce pay.

The changes are part of Australia Post's $500 million drive to boost productivity through the closure of several mail centers and the concentration of mail sorting in two giant mail centers in Sydney and Melbourne. New technology will be introduced into the super centers allowing Australia Post to slash its work force.

This week the CEPU signed a work agreement covering communication workers employed by Telstra that will streamline work classifications, abolish demarcation and allow downsizing.

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Miners strike over dangerous conditions

Workers at the Ravensworth mine in the New South Wales Hunter Valley went on strike for 24 hours last week after management sent four miners to work in an area wired with 1.5 tons of live explosives. The charges had been placed by contract workers during a previous work stoppage by unionized miners. Workers operating two bulldozers sent to retrieve coal the next day detected the unexploded charges and immediately ceased working in the area.

A spokesman for mine owner Peabody Resources downplayed the seriousness of the incident, claiming that it was "not at all unusual." The strikers were also protesting an attempt by management to put contract

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labor on machines normally operated by permanent union crews. Peabody has announced plans to cut its unionized work force by two-thirds over the next two years, leaving only 70 permanent workers at the mine.

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Ansett to lay off more staff

Ansett Airlines, Australia's second largest air carrier, announced this week that it intends to ax another 300 jobs on top of the 600 destroyed since March. Most of the job cuts will take place in Tasmania and Queensland where Ansett has transferred the operation of regional flights to a wholly owned subsidiary, Kendell Airlines. Ansett will cut 129 jobs in its Launceston, Hobart, Rockhampton and Mackay operations as well as 60 pilots and 130 flight attendants.

Overall more than 2,000 jobs will eventually be eliminated. The airline unions have accepted the company's claim that it is in economic difficulty and they have organized no campaign to defend jobs. They have also backed away from an earlier substantial wage claim and instead have called for a mere 3 percent increase linked to productivity trade-offs.

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Gallery refuses to pay wages

The Public Sector Union plans to take a dispute with the National Gallery of Victoria concerning more than $200,000 in unpaid wages into the federal court. The gallery management's refusal to pay money owed to casual workers has already provoked a 24-hour stoppage and threats of further action. A stop-work meeting held this week passed a no confidence motion in the gallery's general manager John Newcome.

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Asia

Labor unrest grows in China

The Stalinist regime in China has admitted that there is a rising tide of industrial disputes across the country. The state-run newspaper *Xinhua News* stated this month: "The number of disputes between employers and employees has been increasing in China in recent years as a result of the growth in overseas funded and private enterprises."

The report gave no figures but quoted an official from the All China Federation of Trade Unions as saying that the disputes "are usually related to payments, extended working hours, lack of safety measures, insults to workers' dignity and physical abuse."

The union federation, which is virtually an arm of the state apparatus, has been responsible for setting up Special Economic Zones that are notorious for the exploitation of workers. The union body explicitly defends the Chinese constitution, which outlaws the right of workers to strike.

One union official, Tian Yukun, said there were more "problems" with workers outside the public sector, as only one-third of the 145,000 foreign-invested firms had union representation. It is in the nonunionized sector that many strikes are occurring as workers independently fight the companies for better conditions.

Labor unrest is also mounting over the restructuring of the public sector. There have been a number of demonstrations in recent months against factory closures or nonpayment of wages.

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Hong Kong employers reject minimum wage demand

The General Chamber of Commerce rejected a submission by the Hong Kong Social Security Society to set a minimum wage for HK$5,800 a month for workers, saying it would create a lack of flexibility in market operations and might not serve employees' interests.

An employers' spokesman warned: "During a period of economic recession and sluggish business, in order to reduce operating costs, employers may have to cut the number of permanent posts. Employees can hold their jobs by accepting lower pay."

The chamber dismissed calls for the minimum wage to be set at the level needed to support a worker and his family. "Should the level of wages set by the free market be too low, it is up to the employee to decide whether he or she will accept the wage or apply for social security assistance," it stated. The weekly social security allowance for a family of four is only HK$2,750 which is not sufficient to meet basic living costs.

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Hong Kong workers seek unpaid wages

Eighty Hong Kong construction workers have filed a claim with the Labor Tribunal for $3 million in unpaid wages from their employer, Wing Tai Construction Engineering Company. Workers were not paid between July and September after the bankruptcy of a subcontractor working for Wing Tai.

Under Hong Kong law, the chief contractor is responsible for making payment when a subcontractor fails to do so. However, the company has refused to pay the money, disputing the amount owed and claiming that it needs to verify payroll and salary records. By forcing the case into the Labor Tribunal, the company is hoping to drag out payment until at least next January.

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Fire kills 27 Korean workers

Fire swept through a cold-storage plant under construction in Pusan, South Korea October 29, killing 27 workers and injury 15, including five firefighters. Police in the port city said the fire engulfed the three upper floors of the eight-story structure, trapping dozens of people. Most of the dead suffocated in toxic gas.

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Indonesian workers protest

Five hundred workers of PT Daeyu Rekael, a sweater factory in Bekasi (West Java), marched to the offices of the Legislative Assembly and Labor Department October 28 to protest the sacking of 170 workers. The workers demanded to know why the workers were sacked and protested the lack of any representation in the factory.

Meanwhile in Medan, in northern Sumatra, five workers from PT Latexindo Toba Perkasa, a glove factory, continued their hunger strike in front of a Legal Aid Society office to protest violent strikebreaking by the police. The workers have been striking for higher pay and better benefits. During the last week of the strike one of the workers was struck and injured by rubber bullets and another was beaten after being taken to a police station. Twelve workers are still in police custody.

One of the hunger strikers said that they will continue their action until those being held are released. The workers, visibly weakened by hunger, carried posters which said: "15 Percent Pay Rise, 100 Percent Price Rise" and "Demand for Wages is Answered with Bullets."

In Bandung 700 workers at PT Metro Corp Indonusa were also on strike for higher pay, increased food allowances and holiday time. Pickets disrupted traffic outside of the plant. Also in Bandung 60 textile workers at CV Dwi Wangi are being threatened with termination because they demanded that the company pay the balance of their wages under a new wage law. According to the law, which went into effect on April 1, the workers should receive 69 cents per day, or $4.83 per week. Until now they have only received $1 a week.

In an earlier meeting with the company, after a strike last June, the company agreed to discuss the payment of the balance owed to workers. It has refused to do so and instead has forced 150 workers to stay home indefinitely. The company has also stepped up its intimidation of workers, throwing six out of company housing.

In another area of Bandung hundreds of workers from PT Kasta Timbul are also striking for a increase in wages and food subsidies. Inflation is currently running higher than 80 percent.

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Europe

Polish coal miners demonstrate against austerity measures

Polish coal miners demonstrated in Warsaw, Poland on October 26 in

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opposition to a wage freeze, large-scale sackings and retirement terms. Around 1,000 miners marched in the city and shouted chants outside the government cabinet offices.

The economic ministry reported that Poland's coal mines lost nearly $400 million in the first eight months of the year, and said this figure may double by the end of the year. In June the government unveiled a plan involving the layoff of 105,000 miners in the next few years. The plan forecasts that Poland's annual output of coal will drop to 111.8 million metric tons by 2002. Present output stands at 137 million metric tons.

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German information workers hold first Internet strike

One hundred twenty workers at the computer architecture and software group, FIRST, held the first "Internet strike" on October 21 in Berlin, Germany. The workers rendered a section of FIRST's Internet pages unreadable in protest against a cut in wages.

Workers covered 13.5 percent of the firm's pages with dollar symbols symbolizing the 13.5 percent wage cut that is being imposed. The staff had agreed to a pay claim with FIRST's parent company, GMD, a research group. This contact was then canceled by the German Interior Ministry at the end of September without consulting GMD. GMD has 1,200 employees. The OeTV trade union said that a cut in wages would result in software specialists avoiding research work at GMD.

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British midwives protest staff shortages, low pay

Members of the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) petitioned Parliament and handed in a petition to the Prime Minister at Downing Street in London on October 21. The nurses were protesting an acute staff shortage in the profession.

The demonstration follows the publication of a report by the RCM and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) which said that hundreds of babies were dying each year due to poor training. It also concluded that doctors and midwives were being overworked.

At present there are 32,000 midwives in the National Health Service and that number is falling at a rate of 7 percent a year. RCM General Secretary Karlene Davishas said in an interview with Breakfast TV that nurses were not being recruited because of the low rate of pay. "We are concerned about the service being offered. This is why the College was created. If there are not enough midwives, patient care is severely affected, and pay is a fundamental factor as it shows how midwives are valued."

Midwives start on a rate of just 14,000 per annum. A recent report by the Audit Commission found that there are not enough staff in two-thirds of hospitals for mothers-to-be to have one-to-one care.

The RCM and RCOG have issued some proposals to address the crisis in midwifery and have said half of all baby deaths could be avoided if better training standards for midwives were introduced and workloads reduced.

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Ford workers in Spain walk out in protest over new contract

Workers at the Ford's Almusafes plant in Valencia, Spain, struck for 24 hours October 21 against the company's attempts to drive up productivity and hold back wages. The workers also voted for each shift to stop work for half an hour every day in support of their demands. Over 5,000 of the 8,300 working at the plant, which produces the Ka model, took part in a demonstration through Valencia.

Ford has offered a 2.6 percent pay increase this year and 0.5 percent for the next two years. The company's package also includes a 36.5 hour week by 2001, productivity bonuses and the establishment of an apprenticeship school. Ford is seeking to introduce a third shift in the factory. The unions' minimal demand for a 3 percent increase, and 1 percent for each of the next two years, as well as job guarantees, was flatly rejected by the company.

The unions stressed that they were prepared to negotiate a compromise. The Socialist Party's UGT (General Workers Union), presented a counteroffer and called for strike action to be suspended.

Ford's vice-president of global operations, David Thursfield, issued an ultimatum to the unions on October 22, stressing that if the unions' joint committee did not accept the offer immediately they "will put the future of the factory in jeopardy and the company will initiate the transfer of production to other plants." He made his threat via satellite videoconferencing from the corporation's Detroit headquarters. After listening to a couple of comments from union leaders, he cut off the communication.

Twenty-four thousand jobs in the parts and components industry depend directly on the Almusafes plant.

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Romanian coal miners strike against loss of wages

On October 27 coal miners in the Jiu Valley coalfield threatened an all-out strike unless they received two weeks' outstanding back pay. Three of eleven mines in the valley have already taken strike action in protest. Miners held a rally outside the offices of the coal board in Petrosani. Several hundred miners chanted: "We want our money".

The mining authority, Valeriu Butulescu, has stated that it cannot pay the arrears because it is owed more than $20 million by two steel mills and the Conel electricity company.

Last year 20,000 of 54,000 miners left the industry after being offered redundancy packages, as the government restructured the industry to close those pits deemed unprofitable.

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200,000 Romanian teachers strike against education cuts

School teachers in Romania held a one-day strike October 27 in opposition to cuts in the state education budget and low pay in their profession. It is estimated that 200,000 teachers struck on a nationwide basis.

The previous day teachers union leaders met with Romanian Prime Minister Radu Vasile. The talks were unable to resolve the dispute. Vasile said the government would not allot any extra money in its budget. The government has made cuts of $105 million in education, as a direct result of demands by the International Monetary Fund that Romania cut its state spending.

Teachers are among the lowest paid workers in Romania, with a new teacher only being paid approximately $90 per month. This compares with the national average of about $120. The education system is in a deep crisis. Hundreds of rural schools are without electricity, water or heating and many pupils have to pay for their own textbooks.

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Greek telecom workers strike

Telecom workers in Greece have conducted a number of 24-hour strikes since October 26. The workers employed by OTE Telecom are protesting against the third flotation of the company on the stock market, a wage dispute and pension rights. The OME-OTE trade union said that 80 percent of OTE workers participated in the strikes. OTE is to trade on the New York Stock Exchange on November 2.

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French transit workers continue strikes against assaults

French transit workers took strike action in a number of cities on October 26. A strike in Paris was called following an injury to a driver in the La Defense district. The driver was injured after a fire extinguisher was thrown through his windshield by a passenger who allegedly boarded the wrong train. The service on the Paris A line was disrupted by the strike, with trains running every 30 to 45 minutes instead of every 5 to 10 minutes.

A dispute in Marseille began after a ticket agent was attacked on a train between the towns of Avignon and Lyon. The second day of the walkout on October 26 saw only one in five commuter trains in service. Bus

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drivers in the city ended a two-day strike on the same day and the drivers' union said that in future they would take strike action every time a bus driver was assaulted.

A transit strike began in the city of Lille on October 20 and entered its sixth day October 26. Lille is the fourth-largest metropolis in the country. A dispute also took place in the city of Chambery on October 16 and was ongoing on October 26. These latter disputes were also called in opposition to physical assaults on workers.

The attacks have mostly occurred in working class suburbs that have been hard-hit by double-digit unemployment rates. While the national unemployment figure is 11.8 percent, the rate can top 50 percent in some neighborhoods.

Much of the workers' anger has been directed towards staff reductions that are part of the government's plan to privatize the transport system. However, the Jospin government, with the tacit support of the transport workers' unions, has sought to use the protests to step up its law-and-order campaign for the use of more police and paramilitary troops in working class areas. The transport unions have refused to fight against the government's privatization plans, let alone the increase in youth unemployment.

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French Viagra workers take strike action

French workers who produce Viagra, the anti-impotence drug, struck on October 19 in the town of Poce sur Cisse in central France. The workers are demanding an additional month's salary per year and a bonus payment of 5,000 francs ($910).

Around 200 workers picketed the Viagra factory in the town. The French television station LCI reported that workers set up a barricade in front of the factory. Managers refused to meet those on strike, stating that they would "not negotiate under pressure."

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Irish building workers protest jailing of colleagues

Irish building workers took unofficial strike action last week in defense of two colleagues who have been jailed. Bricklayer David McMahon and laborer William Rodgers, both from Tallaght, Co. Dublin, were jailed on October 21 under the anti-union laws. The jailings arise from an industrial dispute on building sites in Dublin's Merrion Road area. Two construction companies brought the legal action against the workers who had been protesting against the number of building workers who are being employed as contractors.

On October 23 the workers were sent back to Mountjoy Prison after being told by the High Court they would remain there until they agreed not to picket construction sites. The workers refused to comply. Dozens of building workers protested outside the jail and were forcibly removed by the Irish police, the gardai. A sit-down demonstration of workers was broken up by the gardai on the city's North Circular road.

Around 500 workers have walked off building sites in the area to protest against the treatment of McMahon and Rodgers. Workers in other parts of the republic also reportedly walked off the job.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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