

Workers struggles around the world -- 3

October 1998

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The Americas

General strike planned against Colombian austerity measures

Colombia's public sector workers are set to strike October 7 against the government's economic austerity program which calls for a cap on wage increases and an increase in taxes. The strike will affect state-run schools, hospitals and other basic services and will also affect operations of the state-owned oil and telecommunications industry.

"We've taken the decision to stage a national, indefinite strike," said Luis Eduardo Garzon, president of the Unitary Workers Federation (CUT), the largest umbrella organization of public and private sector unions. The strike will culminate in street demonstrations in the capital city, Bogota, on October 14.

Last week CUT's 700,000 public sector workers carried out a 48-hour strike that failed to force government officials into negotiations to adjust its policies. The government's new austerity program would hold workers to an average of 14 percent wage increases in 1999 while boosting government revenues by expanding the array of products and services that come under the 16 percent value-added tax.

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Philadelphia transit union appeals to labor board

Transport Workers Union Local 234 in Philadelphia is filing a complaint with the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board accusing management of violating labor law by not signing a contract that was agreed to orally.

TWU officials called off the powerful 40-day strike against the Southeast Pennsylvania Transportation Agency (SEPTA) July 10 on the basis of the verbal agreement. Union officials then persuaded their members to vote on the deal July 24.

Shortly after the strike SEPTA management said it has significant disagreements over the actual terms of the pact and its 15-member board refused to ratify it. While Local 234 officials claim there are only two issues in contention--part-time employment and health care benefits for injured workers-- SEPTA's chief labor strategist David Cohen said there are as many as seven areas of disagreement.

Cohen has stated that it may be several months before the two sides actually achieve a contract. In any event, with the legal process that Local 234 has initiated, it could take the state labor board years before it successfully adjudicates the dispute.

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NBA basketball players still locked out

The start of the NBA season is in doubt as basketball team owners continue their lockout of the players union. The owners made their latest proposal September 25, still calling for a system with an absolute ceiling on salaries--or a "hard" salary cap. The union said the owners included 16 pages of new demands that hadn't been discussed in any previous meetings.

Once a new agreement is reached, it will take at least three weeks to sign players, make trades and hold abbreviated training camps. So unless a deal can be completed a few days after the sides reconvene October 8, there appears to be no way the 82-game season can start on schedule November 3. The league already has announced an indefinite postponement of training camps and the cancellation of 25 exhibition games. More of the preseason could be scrapped later this week.

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Support staff strike Canada's busiest airport

Support staff at Toronto's Pearson International Airport walked out on strike early Friday morning. Members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, the 520 workers maintain electrical, computer, security and baggage systems and direct traffic on the airport's aprons.

The strikers, whose wages have been frozen since 1991, are seeking wages hikes of between 15 and 23 percent in the first year of a three-year agreement and a five percent increase over the two following years.

According to a PSAC representative, the Greater Toronto Airports Authority provoked the strike by refusing to accept standard contract language concerning layoffs and the recall of laid off employees.

Management says the strike will lead to delays in arrivals and departures. Because Pearson Airport is the principal air travel hub in Canada, these delays will impact on air travel across Canada.

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Canadian government workers voting on selective strikes

The Public Service Alliance of Canada is seeking a mandate from 135,000 federal government workers to launch selective strikes. The union executive claims that by targeting strategic government operations like tax

and custom offices for strike action the federal workers will be able to avoid a showdown with the government and the imposition of a back-to-work law. In 1991, the then Tory federal government used legislation to break a national PSAC strike.

The federal government workers have had their wages frozen for the past seven years, under both Liberal and Tory governments.

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Australia

Pacific Tyres strike ended

A three week strike at South Pacific Tyres in Footscray, Victoria was called off after workers voted narrowly by 170 to 150 to accept a union recommendation to return to work on management terms. Officials from the National Union of Workers told striking workers they had no choice but to accept the company's offer of an 8 percent wage rise spread over two years and linked to productivity increases. The agreement includes a clause that will allow management to sack any worker who is unable to keep up with increased production quotas.

The strike erupted earlier this month after the workers at Footscray plant discovered that they were being paid up to \$250 less than workers in the company's other factories at Sommerton and Thomastown.

One worker described the deal as a sell-out. "We have been on strike for three weeks with very little money. Our families have gone without much and now the union tells us to agree to a deal that adds up to no more than \$13.50 per week." he said.

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Burnie pulp mill to close

Amcor, Australia's largest paper maker, will close its pulp-making mill in Burnie, Tasmania, following the acceptance of a redundancy package by workers at a union meeting on September 24. The closure will result in the loss of over 150 jobs.

Amcor announced in July that it would shut the pulp mill as part of a global restructuring plan. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) called stop work meetings at the company's plants in Maryville and Shoalhaven and promised to launch a "political, industrial and community campaign". But no national industrial action was called. Instead union officials demanded the workers deliver increased productivity and cooperate with the company to lower costs in an attempt to keep their jobs.

In 1992, workers picketed the Burnie plant around the clock for weeks against plans to axe hundreds of jobs and to destroy scores of hard won conditions. In what was a key test case, the Australian Council of Trade Unions imposed the company's demands on the workforce arguing that increased productivity was needed to keep the plant open.

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Pharmaceutical jobs cut

More than 300 workers, including 100 scientists, employed by the pharmaceutical company Wyeth will lose their jobs when the company closes its Parramatta plant in Sydney in 18 months time. A company spokesman confirmed that another 200 workers will be sacked from its other Sydney factory at Smithfield. The sackings are part of a global corporate restructuring that will see a major part of Wyeth's operations relocated to the Republic of Ireland.

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Africa

Edgar workers to strike in South Africa

Workers employed by the Edgar group of companies in South Africa are threatening national strike action to oppose a proposal to impose a wage freeze for the 1998-99 financial year. The Edgar group, which includes retail outlets such as Jet, Cuthberts, ABC and Express, maintains that freeze is necessary as a result of a 28 percent fall in profits.

The wage freeze was announced ahead of a claim by the South African Commercial and Allied Workers Union for wage increases of 15-20

percent for its 3,000 members employed by the group. The company has taken a 733,000 rand lawsuit against the union claiming loss of earnings arising from previous industrial action taken against the freeze including go-slows and picketing.

The union is also calling for a consumer boycott of Smart Centre and Bee Gees retail stores who refused to settle a dispute over wages and improved working conditions. Management of both retail outlets had locked out workers recently involved in industrial action.

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Capetown garbage strike stopped by judge

South Africa's Labour Court granted an interim interdict this week sought by Capetown's six municipalities and the Cape Metropolitan Council to stop a strike by garbage collectors. The court ruled that although the union had given the required 48-hour notice it had failed to indicate the precise time the strike would begin.

The South African Municipal Workers Union called the strike following 18 months of negotiations that centred on the ratio of full-time union delegates to the number of workers employed. There have already been a number of wildcat strikes over the issue.

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Move to end South African auto strike

The South African government, employers and unions are moving to impose a settlement to end a month-long strike by 50,000 auto workers. The workers, employed in auto spares shops, panel beating outlets, component making firms, fuel stations and car dealerships, downed tools on September 1 seeking a 12-18 percent pay increase.

Negotiations broke down after the auto employers offered only a 4.5 percent raise. New negotiations are due to begin under the auspices of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). The authority has been used to settle a number of recent wage disputes resulting in workers receiving increases far below what they demanded.

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Asia

Indonesian workers protest low wages

More than 2,500 factory workers in the major industrial city of Surabaya in East Java marched on the local parliament building on September 29 to demand higher wages. Prior to the march the workers from the pesticide firm Walet Kencana broke into the company's offices, smashed windows and threw out furniture and filing cabinets.

On the same day, 150 striking workers from a plastics factory in Medan, another industrial centre in northern Sumatra, held a protest over wages. In recent weeks thousands of workers across Indonesia have held strikes and demonstrations over the soaring cost of living and low wages.

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Union agrees to Philippine Airlines demands

Philippine Airlines plans to restart operations in early October after the PAL Employees Association (PALEA) reversed its earlier opposition to a 10-year no-strike agreement which will pave the way for the wholesale loss of jobs and conditions. As part of the deal sponsored by Philippine President Joseph Estrada, union members will be given a 20 percent stake in the airline and union officials will get three seats on the board.

A secret ballot of union members had opposed the agreement, leading to the closure of PAL last week. To push through the deal, the union leaders called a new referendum this week and actively campaigned for workers to accept the company's demands.

The airline, which has debts of \$US2.1 billion, is controlled by one of Estrada's close business cronies Lucio Tan. Restarting the airline may be complicated by the claims of companies which leased aircraft to PAL.

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Europe and Russia

Unrest growing in Russia over lack of wages

On September 30 Russian Interior Ministry soldiers were put on

heightened alert to prepare for strikes, demonstrations, road and rail blockages by workers demanding the resignation of President Boris Yeltsin and prompt payment of massive wage arrears in the public and private sector.

Unrest is growing prior to next week's mass demonstrations planned by Russian trade unions. Thousands of scientists from 25 cities gathered in Moscow and blocked six main highways into the capital city. Research scientists had been refused permission for their blockades by Moscow authorities.

On September 29 hundreds of workers from the Ukraine's five nuclear power plants demonstrated through the capital Kiev in uniform. Chanting "Wages, Wages," they massed outside the government building demanding seven months arrears. No officials appeared. Later the First Deputy Energy Minister stated that there was no money available and that the workers were, in effect, "providing their services for nothing."

One worker from the Zaporizha plant, Europe's largest nuclear power plant, said, "How can you expect a man in charge of complex equipment to keep his mind on his job if he is worried every minute about how he is to feed his family?"

Trade unions in Russia predict that the October 7 demonstration will bring nine million workers out on strikes and demonstrations. Mikhail Shmakov, head of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions, said that 37,000 companies and organisations would be involved in around 9,500 towns, cities and villages throughout Russia. This is despite the unions' efforts to limit the action out of fear of a social eruption.

The unions are working closely with the authorities all over the country. Special units have been set up, between the unions and the Interior Ministry, in order to maintain public order. Some 11,000 police officers and 6,000 Interior Ministry troops will be stationed in Moscow next Wednesday, when the protests culminate in a national demonstration.

Meanwhile, more than one million officers and soldiers, who have not been paid since May, have flooded the government with inquiries over their wages. A hotline set up by Defence Minister Igor Sergeev was reportedly jammed. Hotlines have been established in the eight military districts and in four Naval Fleets.

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Belgian workers strike against Levi Strauss layoffs

A strike closed down the Belgian units of blue-jeans manufacturer Levi Strauss September 24, two days after the company announced it would close three Belgian plants and eliminate 1,000 jobs as part of a European restructuring plan. Workers at a fourth Belgian plant not affected by the closure announcement joined the strike in solidarity.

Officials of the San Francisco-based company said the three plants in Belgium and one in France were chosen because of high labor costs and overcapacity. Union officials are involved in negotiations over the closures. Levi Strauss is laying off 1,500 workers in Europe, about 20 percent of its continental workforce, and another 1,000 at two US plants.

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Turkish workers at US air bases end strike

On September 29 Turkish ancillary workers at three American military bases ended their eight-week strike. The 1,500 members of the Harb-Is trade union had suffered violent assaults, intimidation and attempts to break their strike by military personnel. The agreement is unclear.

According to a US embassy spokesman the union agreed a 20 percent increase in base wages and quarterly increases to offset Turkey's high inflation rate. This falls well short of keeping up with the country's 70 percent inflation. Workers were also demanding an end to subcontracting, a reduction in working hours, stopping forced resettlements and an extension of holiday rights.

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Strike movement against privatisation grows in Greece

Doctors in the Greek National Health Service are set to continue strikes,

in protest against the Socialist Party government of Prime Minister Costas Simitis' plans to reduce patient care. The cuts are part of a widespread plan to "streamline" public services as part of an IMF package.

The doctors' strike followed a series of widespread strikes in the transport industry last week. On September 24, half of all scheduled flights to and from Greece were cancelled due to strike action of airport workers against the move to split up and prepare the sale of Greek airlines. The four-day strike involved most airport staff with the exception of air traffic controllers. In Athens, tram, bus and train staff brought public transport to a virtual standstill, as workers struck for six hours, against the threatened privatisation of public transport.

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Swiss workers strike against budget cuts

Workers in hospitals and schools went on strike last week in Geneva and the neighbouring region of Vaud. They joined demonstrations against the budget cuts in the public sector in the two French-speaking states of western Switzerland. Workers at the University Hospital of Geneva, which employs eight thousand staff, spearheaded the protests.

Geneva has one of the highest per capita incomes in the world. But it is running a budget deficit of over 500 million francs (US\$350 million) a year. An agreement between five political parties aims to reduce this by 90 million francs.

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Viasystems to close its Scottish plants

US circuit board manufacturer Viasystems has announced the closure of two factories in Selkirk and Galashiels, with the loss of 1,000 jobs. This is the worst single job cut in the Scottish Borders region for more than 30 years. The area has already suffered thousands of job losses from the closure of its traditional textile industry. The closures will bring job losses in the Borders to 2,000 since May, double the total lost in the previous three years. Viasystems claim the closures are part of a process of cost-saving made necessary by the Asian crisis.

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