

# Workers Struggles Around the World: The Americas

17 November 1998

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## **Police break up hotel occupation in Caribbean resort town**

Police in riot gear and armed with tear gas launched an attack November 8 against workers occupying the Club Med of the Paris-based resort chain on the Caribbean island of Martinique. Unions representing strikers reported four workers were injured and others were treated for inhalation of tear gas.

Some 200 workers struck the hotel November 4 for an 8 percent wage increase. After three days negotiations broke down and workers responded by blocking entrances of the hotel and stopping 373 French, German and Italian guests from leaving the premises. Tourists reported they were not mistreated. Pools and other facilities were kept open for guests during the duration of the occupation while managers were forced to prepare meals.

Club Med management closed the Martinique facility after the occupation had been broken.

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## **FedEx threatens to eliminate pilot jobs**

Federal Express Corporation, the world's largest air freight company, has outlined plans to permanently restructure operations to reduce reliance on 3,500 unionized pilots who are demanding higher wages and threatening job action over stalled negotiations.

Last Tuesday the Memphis-based company, which employs 140,000 workers worldwide, announced tentative plans to end the use of FedEx aircraft in non-US portions of its international operations, relying instead on other airlines to transport all FedEx packages overseas. Domestically, FedEx would operate a smaller fleet of its own planes, while using chartered aircraft and flight crews along with leased trucks to make up the difference.

Despite efforts by a federal mediator, negotiations between the company and the FedEx Pilots Association broke down last month over wages, retirement and scheduling issues. Pilots have refused to work overtime and are currently voting to authorize a strike during the busy holiday season. Union leaders are counting on federal intervention and have called for binding arbitration. Management has refused, saying it will not make any concessions on wages.

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## **Nurses strike Sacramento County**

Sacramento County's jails and health clinic were struck November 9 and 10 by 200 nurses frustrated after working without a contract for more than a year. Nurses were joined at a noontime rally outside the county administration building by other county workers upset over contract issues.

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## **Symphony musicians settle contract dispute**

Management of the Phoenix Symphony Orchestra, aided at the last moment by contributions from two benefactors, agreed to salary increases for orchestral musicians of \$10,000 over a four-year period.

The settlement came one day before a November 11 musicians strike

deadline that threatened to bring the new orchestral season to a halt. At issue was the low starting pay of \$23,000 for new hires. Veteran performers receive an average \$45,000 yearly salary.

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## **Smith's Food and Drug fined for child-labor violations**

The US Department of Labor fined Smith's Food and Drug Centers \$650,000 in fines for violating federal child labor laws. The fine details violations against the Utah-based grocery chain with 172 stores in eight Western states for illegally employing 745 teenagers in Utah, Wyoming, Arizona, Idaho, New Mexico and Nevada.

A majority of the violations of the Fair Labor Standards concerned young 14- and 15-year-old workers who worked during school hours, before 7 a.m. or after 7 p.m., over three hours on a school day, over 8 hours on a non-school day, or more than 20 school hours during a school week.

Twenty-five of the violations involved teenage workers doing hazardous work. Twenty cases were for underage workers loading cardboard boxes into paper balers, a job notorious for workers becoming caught in the crushing machines.

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## **Workers angered over accidental death of striker at Ohio plant**

Late last month workers at the Navistar truck assembly plant in Springfield, Ohio left their plant during a lunch break to join a funeral procession for John McCurry, a coworker who was accidentally hit by a motorist during their three-week strike. McCurry, 32 and a father of three, was one of 150 workers, members of UAW Local 402, who struck from October 5 to October 27 for improved wages. He was hit by a car after leaving the picket line when he attempted to cross Highway 68.

During the strike the UAW isolated the 150 workers at the truck customizing center from the other 4,900 workers in Local 402, who continued to work. The union said its financial experts reviewed Navistar's business position and concluded that the company was offering as much as it could. 'They told us if we didn't accept the contract our jobs would be wiped out, so the same contract we struck against passed,' a worker said.

The death of McCurry so moved workers in the area that in addition to the Navistar workers Teamsters from a piggy-back hauling plant across the highway came out and joined the funeral procession, forcing police officials to temporarily shut down Highway 68. One worker, with tears in his eyes, said McCurry had died for nothing, because the contract accepted by the union leadership was 'nothing.'

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## **WNBA unionizes**

Professional women basketball players of the WNBA voted to have the union of their male counterparts, the National Basketball Players Association, represent them. Of 122 WNBA players, 55 voted for unionization and 24 against. Players are seeking salary increases and the extension of health care coverage into the off season. The women presently make between \$25,000 and \$50,000 yearly. The WNBA, wholly

owned by the NBA, plans to expand from 10 teams to 12 by next summer. NBA team owners are continuing to lock out the male players in a dispute which has already canceled the beginning of the season.

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#### **Duluth teachers threaten strike**

The Federation of Teachers in Duluth, Minnesota filed a strike notice because teachers have worked 17 months without a contract. Bargainers for the city and the teachers union will meet on November 19 and 20 in a final effort to reach an agreement. The strike notice empowers the union to call teachers out on strike between November 20 and December 4. Teachers have not struck in Minnesota since 1992.

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#### **Tentative settlement in Canadian paper strike**

Abitibi-Consolidated and leaders of the Canadian Energy and Paperworkers union have announced a tentative settlement in the five-month-old strike that has closed 10 Abitibi mills in Newfoundland, Quebec and Ontario. The 4,000 strikers are now voting on the agreement, with results to be announced Wednesday.

Pending completion of the ratification vote, neither union nor company representatives will officially comment on the agreement. According to press reports, however, the agreement is for an unprecedented six years' duration.

If this is true, it will only be the latest capitulation on the part of the CEP leadership. In July, leaders of the two CEP locals at Abitibi's Trois-Rivières, Quebec plant broke ranks and engineered a return to work, after the company claimed the plant's closure was imminent. Then in September the union leadership ceded to Abitibi's main demand and agreed to negotiate workrules and schedules on a plant-by-plant basis.

In late October, the strikers voted by a margin of 97.4 percent to reject a company proposal for a seven-year contract, apparently only to see their union accept a slightly shorter contract just two weeks later.

The CEP selected Abitibi-Consolidated as the 'target company' for negotiations on new contracts covering 25,000 workers in the pulp and paper industry in eastern Canada. But with the union caving in to Abitibi's demand for mill-by-mill agreements on all issues except wages and pensions, the concept of a 'pattern' settlement has lost most of its meaning.

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#### **Quebec packinghouse threatens to close strike-bound plant**

The Federated Cooperative of Quebec, a meat and poultry producer, has said it will permanently close its Joliette slaughterhouse next January, eliminating 300 jobs. The company announced the closure two days after workers at Federated Cooperative's Joliette and Berthier, Quebec plants walked out on strike. Members of the Quebec-based Confederation of National Trade Unions, the 568 Cooperative workers have rejected management demands for a \$2.50 per hour wage cut.

According to the union, the bad working conditions in the Joliette plant are a major factor in the company's financial difficulties. Because of a large number of workplace injuries, Cooperative must pay millions annually to the provincial government's workers' compensation scheme, and it spends large additional sums on lawyers fees to fight compensation claims.

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#### **Ontario: York Region teachers locked out**

3,214 public elementary school teachers in York Region, north of Toronto, have been locked out since last Thursday. The school board imposed the lock out after the teachers, who have been without a contract since the beginning of September, threatened rotating strikes.

The main issue in dispute is paid class preparation time. The York teachers are also seeking a 2 percent wage increase in a two-year deal. The board has rejected any pay hike in favor of a \$300 signing-bonus.

The root cause of the conflict is the massive cuts to education funding imposed by the Tory provincial government. According to a recent study,

the Tories have cut \$833 million a year from the province's education system under the new financial regime they established with the passage, last December, of Bill 160. This is in addition to cuts amounting to \$525 million per year that the Tories imposed during their first three years in office.

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#### **Strike Ends at Toronto Airport**

Administrative and maintenance workers at Toronto's Pearson International Airport returned to work last week, ending a 38-day strike which began October 1. The strike at Canada's busiest airport was punctuated by on-again, off-again mass picketing, which on several occasions disrupted air traffic. Leaders of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, however, kept the 520 strikers on a short leash, ensuring that their job action remained both limited and isolated.

The airport workers, whose wages have been frozen for seven years, will receive pay increases ranging between 22 and 47 percent over a six-year period. The new contract is retroactive to August 1.

While the workers ratified the agreement by a majority of 88.4 percent, many of them expressed concern over the union's failure to secure better protection against layoffs. The agreement is the first between the PSAC and the Greater Toronto Airports Authority since the airport was privatized.

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#### **Hamilton transit authority retaliates against strike with layoffs**

The Hamilton Street Railway has responded to a strike by its 452 bus mechanics and drivers by laying off its entire unionized support staff. The 67 inspectors, maintenance and clerical workers, who, like the strikers, are members of the Amalgamated Transit Union, received notice shortly after the drivers and mechanics walked off the job that they will be off work until the strike ends.

A spokesman for the striking workers has legitimately questioned why the wrath of cost-saving falls only on union staff.

At issue in the strike are wages and job security. The transit authority is balking at returning to the bargaining table unless the union agrees to final-offer selection, a form of binding arbitration.

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#### **Nursing home strikers force cancellation of Nova Scotia premier's fundraiser**

A picket line of striking nursing home workers forced the cancellation November 14 of a Liberal Party fundraiser that was to be addressed by Nova Scotia Premier Russell MacLellan.

One hundred thirty-eight workers at the Cove Guest Home in Sydney and 52 workers at the Victoria Haven Guest Home in Glace Bay have been on strike since November 2.

They are spearheading a movement among thousands of nursing home workers to put an end to years of wage freezes and worsening working conditions. Workers at almost all Nova Scotia's nursing homes, part of the provincial government-funded public health system, are currently negotiating new contracts. Most have not received a wage increase in eight years.

Earlier the Cove and Victoria Haven Guest Home workers rejected a tentative settlement that was patterned after the contract their union, the Canadian Auto Workers, reached with Northwood, the province's largest nursing home after a five-day strike. Northwood's 430 licensed practical nurses, personal care workers, dietary and housekeeping workers will receive wage increases of between 18 percent and 20 percent over the life of their new contract. This will bring the wages of the best-paid Northwood workers to a paltry \$12 per hour.

Shaken by the strike movement, the provincial Liberal government has sought to place the blame for it on the trade union-based New Democratic Party. 'The NDP is not a party of labor, it is a party of anarchy,' declared Premier MacLellan. The NDP has criticized the Liberals for underfunding

the nursing home system, but hotly denies the charge of inciting strikes.

Long a dismal, third-place finisher in Nova Scotia elections, the NDP, which imposed drastic budget cuts when it held power in provinces like Ontario, has reaped significant electoral support in the past two years by appealing to popular opposition to federal and provincial government cuts to social programs and public services. In the 1997 federal election the NDP captured the majority of Nova Scotia's seats, and in last spring's provincial election it won the same number of seats as the Liberals. MacLellan's government now depends on Tory parliamentary votes to remain in office.

See Also:

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Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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