

May Day 2009: Reports on rising class struggle from around the world

Our reporters
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This year's May Day, the workers' holiday celebrating the traditions of international proletarian solidarity, is being marked as the global economic crisis is pushing larger sections of the world working class into social struggle.

In the US, there is mounting social anger as trillions of dollars in government funds are shoveled into the banks, but defaulting homeowners and workers facing layoffs or financial difficulties receive no assistance. This took conscious shape in last year's occupation by workers in Chicago of a Republic Windows & Doors plant that was slated for closure.

In another indication of rising class tensions, a recent Rasmussen poll found that in the US—a country where anti-communism was propagated as virtually a state religion, where any positive reference to socialism or the working-class movement is forbidden in the mass media—20 percent of the population, and 30 percent of the youth, find socialism preferable to capitalism.

There are growing signs of working-class resistance in Canada, including the occupation of auto parts maker Aradco in Windsor. There is also massive anger at the concessions imposed by the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union on workers at Chrysler, which the union will extend to GM and Ford workers in the name of "fairness" and "competitiveness."

As the crisis spreads to Europe, there are signs that working-class struggles are not only affecting more and more industries, but spreading geographically and taking on more political form.

Several governments across Eastern Europe have collapsed in recent months, amid protests against their handling of the economic crisis or attempts to impose austerity measures in exchange for access to IMF bailout funds. Protests in the Latvian capital of Riga forced out the Latvian government, and protests have shaken the Ukraine.

The governments of Mirek Topolánek in the Czech Republic and Ferenc Gyurcsány in Hungary have also fallen. Gyurcsány was famous as the politician who, in remarks secretly taped and leaked to the press in 2006, admitted that his election team "lied morning, noon and night" about the state of the country, which had only survived through "divine providence, the abundance of cash in the world economy, and hundreds of tricks."

In France, millions are expected to march in May Day demonstrations, after similar numbers marched in mass, trade-union-organized strikes held in January and March. Strikes are shaking the automobile, energy, transport, and civil service sectors. Workers around the country are occupying workplaces and detaining company management, in an attempt to halt plant closures and job losses—unemployment is increasing at the rate of 1 million a year and is expected to reach over 10 percent this year.

One recent poll found that only 7 percent of the French population opposed workers' holding their bosses hostage.

French workers from the tire maker Continental's plant in Clairoux, which is slated for closure, traveled to Continental's plant in Hanover in Germany for a joint demonstration against the closure both factories. Their German colleagues greeted them with a placard in French quoting the famous conclusion of the *Communist Manifesto*: "Workers of the world, unite!"

According to the IMF and the latest German government figures, Germany's economic decline will reach 6-7 percent, exceeding predictions for the US. Since the Second World War, the German economy has never declined by more than 1 percent in any economic downturn.

Unemployment is clearly set to rise dramatically in Germany, and the bourgeois press openly worries about the social and political consequences. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* recently warned in an editorial that "the peace will soon be over," as "the crisis will reach its third phase in the coming months: the social security system will start to totter." This will have a devastating effect, especially for workers on reduced hours now barely getting by on unemployment funds from the government.

In Britain, sacked workers have occupied Visteon plants in Enfield, Basildon, and Belfast. Trade union official Keith Flett noted, "I think if the [Visteon workers] actually win, we will see a big spread of this kind of thing."

The past twelve months has seen a wave of strikes, protests and demonstrations by workers throughout Asia and the Indian subcontinent in response to attacks on jobs, wages and working hours brought on by the global financial crisis. The rising cost of food and other basic commodities has also precipitated widespread strikes.

The March issue of the Hong Kong-based *Trend* reports that there were 546,470 labour disputes in China from last September to March—a seven-fold increase from the end of 2007. In the export-dependent coastal provinces like Guangdong, Fujian and Jiangsu, the increases are 10-fold and a direct result of the global financial crisis, with sackings and wage cuts affecting tens of millions of workers. The magazine also notes that in the first two months of 2009, more than 500 private businessmen and senior executives were murdered, as a result of not paying or cutting wages or the abuse of workers.

Hong-Kong's *Cheng Ming* magazine reports in its February edition that protests, petitions and demonstrations in China reached 127,467 in 2008 and involved more than 12 million people—compared to 87,000 incidents in 2005. Of these cases, 467 involved storming local government departments, 615 attacks on police and judiciary authorities and 110 attacks on government buildings and vehicles.

In India, there have been 12 nationwide strikes and scores of industry-wide walkouts and demonstrations over the past 12 months involving truck drivers, teachers, doctors and public servants demanding wage rises and full-time employment and opposing state and union government privatisation measures. In January, national strike action was taken by 50,000 oil and gas engineers and hundreds of thousands of public servants, including 300,000 in Bihar, 45,000 in Uttar Pradesh, 250,000 in East Singhbhum, 450,000 in Jammu and Kashmir and 400 in Ukhurl, over wages. In February, 5,000 public servants in Arunachal Pradesh walked out for salary increases.

Popular discontent has erupted in Vietnam over rising inflation with hundreds of strikes for wage rises and improved conditions in the last year, the majority of them in foreign invested enterprises. In February last year more than 5,000 workers went on strike demanding pay rises, more allowances, and cuts to working hours at the Japanese-owned auto-part manufacturer Yazaky Eds Viet Nam Ltd. The next month more than 10,000 walked out demanding higher pay at the South Korean-owned Tae Kwang Vina shoe factory. According to official figures, labor strikes have risen, from 139 in 2003, to 147 in 2005, 541 in 2007 and 649 in the first eight months of 2008.

Major disputes elsewhere in Asia in the past three months include protests by over 2,000 sacked workers at several Indonesian furniture manufacturers over unpaid entitlements in February. Hundreds of retrenched employees at other Indonesian factories are also reported to have occupied their workplaces until they were paid their legal entitlements. In the Philippines, 250 sacked furniture workers picketed their factory that month forcing it to close for two weeks until they were granted entitlements and severance pay.

In March, 200 Philippines workers occupied their company's shipyard for several days opposing plans to retrench 400 employees. In India, 600 retrenched workers from Hero Honda in Rewari held a six-day march to protest against the

retrenchment of 1,800 Honda employees. In the same month more than 4,000 jute mill workers in Bangladesh began protests over the sudden closure of their factory and the non-payment of severance pay and other entitlements.

In April, 380 workers were locked out of the Michelin Thailand tyre plant for refusing to accept a 13 percent pay cut; in Korea, Ssangyong Motor employees voted for strike action and held a four-hour walkout to oppose the destruction of over 2,600 jobs or 37 percent of the company's 7,100-strong workforce.

In Latin America, despite previous boasts by the likes of Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva that the financial crisis was only a US problem, the impact of the financial meltdown is making itself felt in falling exports and commodity prices, the drying up of credit and the wholesale destruction of jobs.

Workers throughout the continent have been thrown into struggles against mass layoffs and plant closures.

In Argentina, workers have carried out factory occupations to halt layoffs and plant shutdowns. After the German auto parts maker Mahle announced the shutdown of its factory in Rosario, some 500 workers took it over to defend their jobs and have held the plant for the last week.

In Chile, workers carried out a general strike on April 16 under the slogan "Workers must not pay for this crisis!" Industrial output in the country has contracted 7.1 percent compared to last year, and the official unemployment rate has risen to 9.2 percent.

In Venezuela, on the eve of May Day, 2,000 metal workers in the province of Ponce de Leon took to the streets, blocking roads and burning tires in preparation for a strike that is set to bring out some 27,000 workers in the province.

And, in the Dominican Republic, a general strike called this week by popular organizations in the northern province of Duarte over social conditions was met with armed violence by police and army troops, with two shot to death, including a 13-year-old boy, and a number others wounded.



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