

The Strike Wave In The U.S.

NEW YORK, April 16 (IPS) — Warning of the threat of a nationwide strike wave, Secretary of Labor W.J. Usery yesterday said that "in this year of heavy contract bargaining involving more than 8 million workers, it is in the mutual interest of labor, management, and the community to avoid strikes." Usery, whose business it is to enforce wage austerity agreements, defended the settlement he imposed in the nationwide teamsters contract, which granted a \$1.65 per hour wage increase, an unlimited cost-of-living escalator clause (COL), and \$17 per week in increased benefits, saying, "The trucking decision with the teamsters was a little high, but a long strike would have been disastrous." He further called for changes in state laws banning public employee strikes, "since strikes occur anyway", avoiding head-on confrontation with unions must be the nation's paramount goal.

The following report on the rapid escalation of strikes in the U.S. and Canada, which was compiled by the U.S. Labor Party's North American Operations Center for use in Europe, confirms Usery's assessment that a major strike wave is growing in North America. What is more, the report indicates workers are winning significant wage gains in defiance of bankers' demands for austerity, and they are receiving broad and often active support in their strike struggles from other unions and the unemployed.

In the three weeks since the teamster accord, we have witnessed a rapid escalation in the number and intensity of strikes both in the U.S. and Canada. The teamster settlement has proved to be the catalyst for scores of trade union contract negotiations across the country. Significantly, with the exception of only a few small industrial strikes in the Boston sub-region in and around Hartford, Connecticut, most of the strikes are offensive in nature. In short, we are seeing a strong, three-fold pattern emerging in the building mass strike wave.

1. Wage Demands

The first pattern reflects contract settlements in the range of 20 to 30 per cent in the U.S. and somewhat higher in Canada.

* In Hartford, 5,800 Avco workers, organized by the UAW voted to give strike authorization last week in an effort to speed up contract talks. Yesterday, they voted not to strike, accepting a 21 per cent wage increase over two years plus a Cost of Living (COL) clause.

* In Milwaukee, the sanitation workers settled after having worked without a contract since Jan. 1975. They won a 20 per cent wage increase over two years, with the first 10 per cent retroactive through last year.

* In Philadelphia, approximately 300 members of the International Watchmens Association settled a three-hour strike which exploded on April 15. The watchmen won \$1.22 an hour in wages and improvements in working conditions. Teamster local 479, representing 400 cement truck drivers, is now striking for a new contract. They are demanding exactly what the International Teamsters won — \$1.65 an hour wage increase, \$17 a week in health and pension benefits and an unlimited COL. It is reported that the strike will shut down several major construction sites within days.

* In the Northwest, IAM (machinists) workers recently settled for the same package as the teamsters.

* In Canada, 4,000 miners in the United Steelworkers Union had their contract providing a 43 per cent wage increase over three years rolled back by the Anti-Inflation Board (AIB). 800 miners at the Ontario site immediately struck. This is the first strike challenge to the AIB, which has rolled back over 150 settlements in the past months.

* In Quebec, the fact-finding board set up under the legislation banning teachers demonstration strikes came out with a recommendation yesterday for a 17 per cent bonus in a desperate effort to cool down the explosive situation in the province. 90,000 teachers and 50,000 hospital workers struck April 13 in defiance of the provincial government's ban on strikes.

* In Vancouver, the 5,000 man Teamsters local 31 settled for a two year contract, gaining a 36 per cent wage increase. The strike lasted three weeks.

* The Akron Beacon Journal quotes Merrill Lynch analysts as predicting that the United Rubber Workers are likely to win a major victory nationally with a 39 per cent wage increase plus COL when its present contract expires April 21.

* In Kansas City, over 6,000 carpenters are striking for a \$1.00 an hour wage increase over two years; 2,000 carpet-layers are out.

* In St. Louis, 2,000 Wagner electric workers are on strike for unlimited COL plus a significant wage increase. There are also several other smaller strikes including a 700-man OCAW (chemical workers) strike.

* In New York City, 20,000 members of the Service Employees International Union (building and elevator workers) have given strike authorization demanding a \$60 a week wage increase or 25 per cent over one year. The strike is set for May 4. Several hundred members of the United Transit Workers Union won an unexpected 18 per cent wage increase retroactive over the past two years.

2. Strike Support

The second emergent pattern of the strikes is the tremendous amount of cross-union strike support exemplified by the support given the San Francisco craft workers by the Transit Workers Union.

* In Kansas City, where there are nearly 14,000 on strike, 2,600 meatcutters are on strike for a wage demand of 25 per cent over two years. Their strike has won the support of 4,000 retail clerks who refuse to cross the picket lines of striking meat-cutters. The strike action has closed down most of the city's grocery stores. Kansas City firefighters are threatening to strike next week in an effort to fight proposed cutbacks. Planning to join them are 500 municipal AFSCME workers. The firefighters union President told organizers that the unions were banding together in a possible move to recall the "strikebreaking" mayor.

* In St. Louis, where 10-13,000 workers are on strike, 7,000 teamsters employed at the Anheuser-Busch brewery are in their fourth week of a walkout in support of pickets set up at their plant by striking Anheuser-Busch workers from the Florida plant. This unprecedented strike support action is continuing strongly despite the fact that the workers at the

St. Louis complex settled for a 30 per cent wage increase over three years plus COL. 3,000 teamster distributors of Anheuser-Busch products also went out in support. One teamster picket said, "It's our fight in San Francisco," before organizers could brief them on the strike action there.

* In Philadelphia, the watchmen's strike was supported by 3,000 longshoremen who would not cross the picket lines and teamsters who would not make deliveries. The support of the longshoremen came as a surprise since the watchmen were used as scabs on the longshoremen during their strike some months ago.

* In Meriden, Conn., teachers were locked out as a result of having their just-concluded settlement ripped up by the city administrators. On April 10, the AFSCME workers, including both sanitation and highway workers refused to cross the picket lines and are out in support of the strike. The city council hired private garbage collectors who, when con-

fronted by pickets, joined the strikers in sympathy.

3. Contracts Re-Opened

The third emerging pattern is union efforts to catch up in light of contract gains being won by other unions. Unions are threatening to or have reopened their contract for renegotiation for a new settlement.

* In Milwaukee, 3,500 IAM workers at a 6,000-man Ladish machine tool plant, also organized by the UAW, have voted to strike in the middle of their contract in order to add a 10 per cent wage increase to their present contract. The local already has unlimited COL.

* In Seattle, a meeting of regional postal workers has reportedly voted strike authorization to its leadership, threatening to break the three-year contract in an effort to fight speedup. The Northwest is the site where the infamous "Kokomo" post office speedup plan is to be implemented by the summer.