Economic Crisis Leads To Growing Strike Wave

by Marianna Wertz and Linda Everett

The effects of the global economic collapse, and especially the growing crisis brought on by the rising price of oil, are beginning to awaken labor ferment in the United States. A series of strikes and labor actions, from coast to coast, indicates that even the sell-out of labor's interests by the AFL-CIO leadership, in endorsing Al Gore's Presidential campaign, has not totally pacified rank-and-file unionists, whose pockets are getting emptier and emptier.

The center of this ferment is in California, where more than 4,400 Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority bus and rail drivers struck at 12:01 a.m. on Sept. 16. The drivers struck when the Metropolitan Transit Authority, facing huge deficits in the coming years, attempted to force the union to accept 15% reductions in overtime (a major source of drivers' income) and in pension payments.

The bus drivers' strike is creating real difficulties for about half a million Angelinos who rely on mass transit, many of whom are very poor themselves, but the strikers, under intense pressure, are sticking to their guns.

James Williams, chief negotiator for the striking United Transportation Union, declared, when negotiations broke off on Sept. 27, "We are not going to accept a contract on the backs of operators I represent. We are going to stay out here till we get the job done."

On top of this strike, 47,000 Los Angeles County workers, organized by Service Employees Local 660, are expected to strike on Oct. 2, barring a last-minute compromise. County workers are pushing for far more than the offered 9% pay raise over three years, to make up for pay cuts over the last four years. A 15.5% raise would simply return members' inflation-adjusted pay back to the 1990 level.

Truckers in Motion

The rising price of diesel fuel is prompting action from American independent truckers, which is beginning to mirror the huge ferment that has shut down whole nations in Europe in recent weeks (see article in this issue). In Alabama, on Sept. 16, some 60 independent truckers and their friends held an impromptu rally in Thomasville, protesting the rising fuel prices that are strangling their businesses and forcing many of them into near-term bankruptcy. Last year, independent truckers paid an average of $1.12 per gallon for diesel; this year, the cost is $1.64 or higher.

The rising price of diesel was the immediate catalyst for an independent port truckers action on Sept. 26. Drivers in Oakland, California, formed a demonstration convoy at the Port of Oakland marine terminal, to protest "high fuel prices, low pay, and chaotic marine terminal operations," which, they say, are driving America's immigrant port drivers "to despair." Similar protests occurred in Long Beach, California, and in a dozen other ports coast to coast.

At the Long Beach demonstration, organizers with Lyndon LaRouche's political movement distributed LaRouche's recent statement on the oil crisis (see last week's issue) to the 100 or so largely Hispanic drivers, many of whom were eager to be recontacted. These California port drivers are among the lowest paid and overworked group of laborers in the country. The Long Beach rally came on the heels of a growing number of bankruptcies at port companies and spontaneous work stoppages by port drivers around the United States and Canada, according to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

On Oct. 4, the Teamsters will hold protests at ports around the nation, to galvanize the 50,000 independent truckers into action against the rising oil prices and bad working conditions, and in hopes of eventually being able to organize the independents into the union.

Nurses Strike

On the other side of the continent, about 1,500 nurses at the Washington Hospital Center, in the nation's capital, voted overwhelmingly on Sept. 19 to strike, against mandatory overtime of up to 16-17 hours and the requirement that nurses care for as many as a dozen patients (when five is appropriate) as a solution to the hospital's routine understaffing problems. The hospital, which is owned by MedStar (which recently acquired Georgetown University Hospital and immediately threatened to shut down its trauma care units, among others), is also forcing nurses to take assignments on units where they lack expertise.

As one representative of the District of Columbia Nurses Association, the union which represents the hospital's nurses, told *EIR,* staff trained to care for patients on the medical surgical unit, are told to staff the critical care units, which requires a much higher level of expertise. Yet, if there is a mishap, it is the nurse who is ultimately responsible legally for the lives of the patients. Continually shifting nurses to cover staff shortages, creates inherent instability in the care of acutely ill patients, leading to very high turnover rates at the hospital.

Besides the staffing crisis, nurses also asked for a 10% cost-of-living increase over three years. The hospital's response has been to hire 500 nurse replacements at $5,000 a week—drawing them from low-wage states across the country—while the compensation package the union is asking for, is less than $5,000 per year.