

NEWS WRAP

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Many people in France cling to the perspective of class struggle in their minds. Class struggle thinking has shaped the manner in which the French view the current economic meltdown and crisis. French workers view the economic crisis as the fault of greedy Wall Street speculators and their equivalents in French. Popular outrage has increased with reports of huge bonuses and stock options even in business which received anti-economic crisis subsidies. With their jobs endangered by layoffs, French striking workers have been confronting their bosses and employers, even without any battle plans.

When managers at a US-owned caterpillar factory in a Grenoble suburb refused to negotiate under pressure, about forty employees invaded the executive suite, and locked up five top bosses on 31 Mar 09. Workers facing lay-offs at a printer plant near Strasbourg, operated by a Hewlett-Packard contractor, locked their bosses in a meeting room for about twelve hours, and pressurized them to continue negotiating on a severance package, on 16 April 09. An executive in Pithiviers, the head of Sony France in Pontoux-Sur-Ardour, and three expatriate British bosses in a Scapa Group Adhesive Tape plant at Bellegrade-Sur-Valserine were held captive overnight by workers, following the announcement of job cuts. In the last week of April 09, Francois-Henri Pinault the Gucci-luxury brand millionaire was surrounded in a car in the middle of Paris, by sales clerks agitated at layoffs in his store. French bosses have been visiting casinos with the pension money of workers. France's perennially high unemployment rate implies that laid-off workers will face acute difficulties in finding new jobs. The French labour union, which has descended from a tradition of confrontation, always demands hefty severance packages. Strikers' demands at the Caterpillar factory have led to demands for redistribution of wealth in France. The hostage-takings by workers, have been denounced as illegal, by French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

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Strongly influenced by Vinobha Bhave and Nirmala Deshpande, Himanshu Kumar in his late forties, and originally from Meerut, and his wife, have devoted their lives to the 'adivasis' of central India. Since 1992 they have set up the Vanavasi Chetna Ashram in Dantewada district of Chattisgarh state. The Gandhi ashram, established in Kanwalnar village, about ten miles from Dantewada town, conveyed education and healthcare to the adivasis of the district, consisting of Gonds, Koyas and Murias tribes.

50,000 tribals in Dantewada have been uprooted from their homes by the civil war between Maoist revolutionaries and the 'Salwa Judum', the vigilante group created by the Chattisgarh state administration. The forcibly displaced refugees have been living in camps, along the main road, under-leaking and unstable camps, without proper food, water and employment. A large number of tribal victims have rushed to Andhra Pradesh, where the living conditions are equally pathetic. Many of the adivasi refugees were rehabilitated in the Vanavasi Chetna Ashram. Local boys and girls rendered assistance. On 17 May 09, state police and Central Reserve Police Force, with the help of bulldozers demolished the Ashram, along with its offices, staff quarters and tubewells. The state government alleges

that the Ashram campus had encroached on government forest land. The Ashram workers maintain that the campus was built on revenue land acquired legally from the local panchayat. The state authorities demolished the Ashram, without waiting for the verdict of local courts, on the 'disputed land'.

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Following the debacle in the last Lok Sabha elections, the CPI(M)-led Left Front state government in West Bengal has stalled all industrialization programmes and major land acquisitions. Fences are being mended with dismayed farmers. The proposal to acquire 120 acres of land at Kharagpur for a City Centre, has been withdrawn, under intense pressure from within the CPI(M) and left partners.

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After the union government increased the floor price, or the so-called 'minimum support price' (MSP) of cotton, the international cotton prices are being quoted at a marginal discount to domestic prices. Hence, India is expected to register a 30% to 60% increase in cotton imports, during the current cotton year (i.e. Oct 08 to Sep 09). Against six lac bales, of 170 kg each bale, imported last year, Indian cotton imports could be eight to ten lac bales in the current year. There could be imports of four to five lac bales of extra long staple cotton, and five lac bales of short and medium staple variety, this year. The 4% increase in minimum support price by the government has resulted in domestic prices to rise above global prices. Global prices are now trading on a par or 55 cents per pound less than domestic prices. Cotton imports occur when global prices are periodically cheaper, at between 1.5% to 2%, than local prices.

Cotton exports are estimated to be lower by 30% this year, due to a reduction in global demand, consequent to the economic recession. 28 million bales of cotton have already arrived, out of India's estimated cotton production of 29 million bales. The balance of 1 million bales is expected to arrive by the end of the cotton year in Sep 09. Falling cotton demand from China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Hong Kong will restrict India's cotton exports to not exceeding 5 lac bales, against 8.5 lac bales last year.

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Proposed on 10,000 hectares in the coastal Raigad district, Mukesh Ambani-led Reliance Industries has not made any progress on the Mumbai Special Economic Zone (SEZ) project. There is strong opposition from locals and various political parties to forceful acquisition of land. The Maharashtra Legislative Assembly elections are slated for Sep / Oct 09. □□□