

Business Briefs

Labor

Ontario teachers shut down schools

The Ontario, Canada Teachers Federation, representing 126,000 teachers at primary and secondary schools, shut down the province's schools on Oct. 27, forcing nearly 2.1 million students out of their classrooms. The action is supported by both opposition parties, but Premier Mike Harris, a conservative revolutionary, vowed he would seek a court injunction within a week to shut down the strike. The teachers argue that the walkout is a political protest, not a strike, against Bill 160, which would give control over many aspects of the province's schools to the provincial government, headed by the Tory, Progressive Conservative party.

In an interview with EIRNS, a union spokeswoman said that the Harris government wants to replace teachers with uncertified aides, fire about 10,000 teachers, and cut billions of dollars from the education budget, in a system where classes are already at 35-40 students per classroom.

The teachers union and five affiliated unions held demonstrations across the province. It is the largest teachers action in Canada's history.

Industry

Nigeria's aluminum smelter begins operation

Nigeria's much-delayed Ikot Abasi aluminum smelter began operation on Oct. 15 and will steadily build up production to 193,000 tons per year, the Aluminium Smelter Company of Nigeria (Alscon) told Reuters on Oct. 30. Officials from Alscon, in which the military government has a 70% stake, said they were not permitted to provide more details on when full capacity might be reached at the natural gas-powered plant. The smelter was originally intended to export over 80% of its production. Local aluminum products companies say they have not yet reached agreement on how much they will pay for Alscon aluminum, or how much they can take.

Conceived in 1988 at a projected cost of \$2 billion, the project was criticized by the World Bank and other lenders as too expensive and ill-conceived, because it was to be located in a remote corner of south-eastern Akwa Ibom state lacking decent infrastructure. Initially slated to open in October 1996, the smelter was delayed by a lack of working capital and raw materials.

But, for Nigeria, it was a chance to promote self-reliance in producing aluminum ingots and billets for local industry and for export, and to make use of natural gas associated with oil production that was simply being burned off. Geological surveys had also inspired Nigeria's economic planners to believe it could become a producer of bauxite. That dream never materialized, and bauxite for the smelter is currently secured from Friguia in Guinea, an ally of Nigeria's current military ruler, Gen. Sani Abacha.

Compared to Nigeria's Ajaokuta steel project, on which over \$5 billion was spent on Soviet technology without producing a single billet, Alscon has been a shining success among several large projects intended to make Africa's most populous nation less reliant on oil exports. Nigeria's technical partners, Germany's Ferrostaal and U.S.-based aluminum giant Reynolds International, have a 30% share in Alscon.

Middle East

Lebanon wants to join Eurasian Land-Bridge

In the course of his four-day visit to Teheran, Iran, Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri "called for establishment of trilateral ground transportation among Iran, Lebanon, and the Central Asian states, as well as launching an air transportation link between Iran and Lebanon," according to reports in the Iranian press. Hariri stated that his government is seeking "access to the Central Asia markets."

Hariri was in Iran with several ministers, including the minister of transportation, who signed an agreement for cooperation in trade and surface transport with Iran.

If Lebanon were to be hooked up to the Eurasian rail network, through Iran, the line

would also go through Syria and Turkey, until a more direct route were constructed, through Iraq.

Infrastructure

Kazakhstan proposes rail cooperation

Kazakhstan's Transport Minister Erkin Kaliyev suggested on Oct. 29, that tripartite cooperation should be forged with Iran and China, in the field of transportation. This arrangement would be aimed, he said, at reactivating the China-Kazakhstan-Iran railway.

Kaliyev told the Iranian ambassador in Almaty, Hassan Qashqavi, that Kazakhstan was eager to consolidate cooperation. He reported that China had already voiced its readiness to take part in such an arrangement. According to Iranian press accounts, Kaliyev "further stressed that all the required infrastructure facilities were available in Iran for the transport of goods from Kazakhstan and other Central Asian Republics, to East Asia, Europe, and the Persian Gulf, and vice versa."

In their meeting, Kaliyev and Qashqavi agreed to convene a session of the Kazakh-Iranian joint transportation commission, in Almaty in December. The Iranian ambassador also called for the resumption of Kazakh Air flights on the Almaty-Mashhad route, which have been suspended for economic reasons.

Brazil

Government must act to protect public health

O Estado, one of Brazil's leading newspapers which usually promotes free-trade ideology, on Oct. 14 editorially called for government action, in the face of a growing health crisis. "The control of 'old diseases' depends largely on elementary structures of basic sanitation, and campaigns of vaccination and education—the first, the responsibility of state and municipal governments; the second, of authorities of all three levels:

federal, state and municipal. In the medium to long term, such actions cost less than paying the treatment costs of hospital patients. The majority of public health problems could be solved before they get to the hospitals," the paper said.

The editorial outlined the disease threat: "Tuberculosis, leprosy, cholera, dengue, measles, yellow fever, and malaria are some of the diseases which are once again being recorded in the medical registries of the most advanced and urbanized areas of the country. . . . Cholera and dengue are diseases typically associated with a lack of basic sanitation. In the last 12 months, the number of deaths from cholera rose by 20%. In the same period, the number of cases of dengue increased by 8%." Some 10,000 people died of AIDS in the last three years in Brazil, but another 18,000 died of "so-called old diseases."

The paper singled out the increase in tuberculosis as cause for concern. AIDS accounts for only 10% of the TB cases; the rest can be laid at the door of "precarious sanitary conditions." With 15-35% of patients leaving treatment before they are cured, the danger of antibiotic-resistant strains is rising. Already, the morbidity rate for TB has risen alarmingly in Brazil (3 per 1,000 cases), and nearly 6,000 people die each year from this disease.

China

Flood control under way on Yellow River

The Yellow River was successfully dammed on Oct. 28, in the first phase of construction of the Xiaolangdi Multi-Purpose Water Conservation Project. This huge project, second in importance only to the Three Gorges Project on the Yangtze River, will be able to control catastrophic floods and provide a foundation for flood control on the lower reaches of the river, water-soil conservation on the Loess Plateau, and economic development on the middle and lower reaches, Xinhua quoted Chinese Premier Li Peng.

"Controlling Yellow River floods and developing its water resources have remained a top priority of the Party Central Committee and the State Council," Li Peng

said. Historical records show the flow of the Yellow River (Huang He) once exceeded 30,000 cubic meters per second, and the river had breached its banks more than 1,500 times in the past 2,500 years, causing catastrophic flooding.

When completed, the project will help stop the 10-centimeter annual rise of the bed in the lower reaches of the Yellow River, by controlling 93% of its 649,000 km² drainage area. The dam has other functions as well: ice-run prevention, silt reduction, irrigation, and water supply. It is the largest World Bank-financed project in China, and the project that employs the largest number of foreign technicians and experts. John Anderson, head consultant of the project, told Xinhua, "The Xiaolangdi Project shows that China needs the world and the world needs China."

Science

China, Indonesia sign cooperation agreement

On Oct. 27, in Beijing, Indonesia and China signed a science and technology cooperation agreement. The accord is a follow-on from a memorandum of understanding signed in Jakarta in June 1994, covering short-term cooperation in the fields of forestry plantation technology, remote sensing, computer software development for digital image processors, designing telecommunications digital switching systems, building a generator factory in Indonesia, and rural electrification construction technology.

Indonesian State Minister for Research and Technology B.J. Habibie witnessed the signing. He was joined by Chinese State Science and Technology Minister Dr. Song Jian and the latter's deputy, Deng Nan, daughter of the late Deng Xiaoping.

Earlier, Habibie met with Chinese Minister for International Trade and Economic Cooperation Wu Yi, and Deputy Foreign Minister Tang Juanxuan. Habibie raised trade possibilities involving Indonesia's aircraft producer, and possible delivery of natural gas supplies from the Natuna fields. Indonesia has lately been promoting counter-trade deals with its trading partners.

GERMAN former Labor Minister Heiner Geissler called for a capital gains tax, in an interview with Info Radio Berlin on Oct. 29. Immense sums are invested in monetary operations, decoupled from real economic activity, he said. Markets are in a "dance around the golden calf."

A CHOLERA epidemic has broken out in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, the *Daily Nation* in Nairobi reported on Oct. 28. More than 1,000 people have died. The epidemic began in Tanzania, said John Sparrow, of the International Federation of the Red Cross, due to poor sanitation and water quality.

PUERTO RICO witnessed an estimated 200,000-person demonstration on Oct. 1, against privatization of the telephone company and the "Chileanization" of government workers' pensions. Two leaders of the protest, Rep. José Varela and Labor Federation President José Torres, warn that Puerto Rico is being turned into a "fascist" state, in an interview in the Nov. 10 *New Federalist* newspaper.

THE HONGKONG government will spend over \$18 billion on infrastructure projects over the next five years, Secretary for Transport Nicholas Ng said on Oct. 29. Plans include three rail projects: the West Rail, the Tseung Kwan O extension, and the Ma On Shan to Tai Wai extension.

STOCKS of U.S. banks are falling, in reaction to the worldwide financial crisis, the Oct. 31 *New York Times* reported. Investors are worried about the banks' exposure to potential catastrophes in Asia, Ibero-America, and Russia. The losses make the banks' large holdings of derivatives all the more dangerous.

TRADE UNION officials estimated that up to 200,000 residents in Primorskii Krai, Russia, took part in protest actions on Oct. 30, over wage arrears and worsening living conditions. Protesters demanded the resignations of President Boris Yeltsin and the federal government.