

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

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Italian metal workers demonstrate in Rome

On May 14, thousands of Italian metalworkers from all over the country held a rally in Rome to demand shorter hours and a wage rise following a one-day strike. Some 150,000 metal workers from the car, steel and other industries were involved.

The action follows the expiry on December 31 of a contract between the trade unions and the metal employers' federation Federmeccanica. Negotiations on a new contract have been under way for seven months. The unions have called for a monthly pay increase of 80,000 lira (\$50), to be phased in over two years, and for a cut in working hours to be introduced into a national contract. Federmeccanica have refused to incorporate a cut in working hours nationally, saying that this could only be implemented locally on a firm by firm basis.

At the rally, union leader Pietro Larizza said that the government had to intervene to settle the dispute. This was echoed by another union representative, Sergio Cofferati, who called on the government to legislate to reduce workers' hours.

Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema wrote a letter to the trade union stating, "The failure to find a way out of this direct confrontation between employers and metal workers is worrying us because it does nothing for a climate necessary to create confidence in the Italian economy." D'Alema and Labour Minister Antonio Bassolino were to meet with unions and the Federmeccanica this week in an attempt to resolve the dispute.

Dockers in British port vote for industrial action

Dockers at the Felixstowe port in Suffolk, England voted for strike action this week to oppose planned changes in their terms of employment. On May 17, more than 80 percent of the dockers voted in support of

industrial action.

The workers are members of the Transport and General Workers Union. A spokesman for the union said that if the changes were introduced dockworkers at the port would be among the lowest paid in the industry.

Union officials at the port and management are now involved in negotiations with the conciliation service ACAS in an attempt to prevent industrial action. The Felixstowe container port is one of the largest and most important in Europe.

London Underground workers vote for industrial action, demand recognition of union official

London Underground workers voted last week for a series of one-day strikes to demand that management recognise a specified number of union officials. The workers are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT). The dispute arose when staff at the Morden station on the Underground's Northern Line maintained that there should be four RMT representatives at the depot. London underground management had insisted that the number should be three.

Following the strike vote, management acceded to the union's demand. The result of another strike ballot of London Underground staff over employment terms and conditions is to be announced this week. A vote for industrial action by them would mean a series of 24 or 48-hour stoppages.

French museum staff take strike action

Some of Paris's main tourist attractions were closed on May 19 as workers struck to demand improvements in staffing levels. Staff at the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay struck, as did their colleagues at the Picasso Museum. Workers also walked off the job at the Fontainebleau Castle Museum outside Paris.

The staff may decide on May 20 to continue the dispute for another 24 hours. Union leaders representing the workers are to meet Culture Ministry

officials in an attempt to end the dispute.

In the last year, workers have struck to demand extra staff and a cut in their workload at several sites popular with tourists, including the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre, the Grand Palais and the Musée d'Orsay.

Spanish airline and pilots union talks break down

On May 13, negotiations between the Spanish Airline Iberia and the pilots' union SEPLA over the ratification of a new contract broke down. The company is on the verge of privatisation and has attempted to placate the workers with offers of a share option.

Iberia said that during the negotiations it offered a 10 percent discount for Iberia employees who want to buy shares in the upcoming privatisation. It also claimed it offered a one-off payment to employees at a cost of about six billion pesetas (\$38.31 million). Iberia's Chairman Pedro Ferreras said that the pilots were "irrational" and that "they may be pilots but they should not be in the clouds."

In response, union officials said that a collective agreement was almost ready to be signed but that Iberia then introduced new terms regarding the reorganisation of the airline. SEPLA said that its members would not accept these new terms.

SEPLA spokesman Santiago Santamaria said that the union would now consider taking strike action. "We have not taken any decision on a possible strike. But we have to think carefully about it, very carefully taking into account the air traffic problems we've had."

Last year Iberia increased its net profits by 18 percent after several years of being in the red.

Gold miners strike in Ghana

Workers at the the Ashanti Goldfields Company, in Obuasi, Ghana, the biggest mine in the country, went on strike on Friday, May 14 to press their demand for a pay increase. They have not had a wage increase for four years. Workers gathered at the miners circle, some holding placards saying, "No more Sam Jonah" (referring to the managing director), "No more suffering", "Three years of suffering is enough", and "We need a pay rise".

The union executive had been in negotiations with the company in Accra, the capital. Last Thursday they reported that management had again refused a wage rise. Union Secretary Adelaide Borden said the workers had rejected the results and that the managers had

agreed to re-open the negotiations. Ashanti Goldfields Company also operates mines in Australia, Guinea, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.



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