

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

24 June 1999

Irish Ferry staff strike to protest new contract

Irish Ferry workers are to strike on July 3 in a dispute over the amount of annual leave they are entitled to when working on the company's new ferry service. Eighteen officers refused to accept a demand that they work for 168 days a year, rather than the present 140. The new contract is to be adopted with the launch of the new fast ferry service, the *Jonathan Swift*.

Irish Ferry were supported by the Labour Court who said the contract should be implemented "on competitive grounds". The court said the company should buy out the difference between the old contract and the new one and make the workers a new offer. The officers rejected the Labour Court recommendation.

On June 15, the 18 officers took strike action, halting the maiden voyage of the *Jonathan Swift* catamaran. The trade union representing the workers, SIPTU, called a ballot of Irish Ferry's 85 officers who supported the call for industrial action. The ballot called for strike action "in the event that any officer is discriminated against for not agreeing to work the new schedules".

Teachers in London strike against redundancies, budget cuts

Teachers at a London comprehensive (high) school took strike action June 17 to protest over next year's budget plan that will lead to redundancies.

Staff at Crown Woods School in Eltham are striking against Greenwich Council, the first strike in the borough's history over the annual budget. The 2,200-pupil school is the biggest in London. School pupils and their parents joined in a demonstration outside the building.

The National Union of Teachers called the strike reluctantly and are now involved in negotiations to prevent further action. The secretary of the NUT's Greenwich Teachers' Association, Adrian Tierney, said of the dispute, "We don't want to take further strike action. We don't even want to take action today, but we have been forced into it. We had a three-hour meeting with the head teacher last week and she refused to negotiate. I'm now appealing to the governors of the school itself to

avoid further action."

The union has not opposed an increase in the amount of work that teachers will have to carry out, merely calling for a smaller increase. Tierney said, "The head teacher is making 17 teachers redundant. The effect of that is to reduce marking and preparation time to 12.5 hours. The NUT recommendation is 20 hours. We have accepted that some increase in contact time is inevitable because of the scale of the budget deficit, but plans to increase teaching time by two hours is unacceptable as it will devastate the quality of educational provision at the school."

The school is to slash its £500,000 deficit by cutting the equivalent of 10.3 teaching posts and reducing the level of non-contact time. The school employs 120 teaching staff and the jobs will go from September. The strike is the latest protest in a six-month campaign to oppose cuts in the school budget. Lobbies of the council have been held as well as a public meeting and a march from the school into the local area.

UK university staff to strike next

University lecturers and admissions staff are to strike in August to demand a 10 percent increase in pay. The Association of University Teachers called the strike last week. The AUT represents 32,000 academic and related staff in universities.

Members of the union—who include admissions tutors at the older universities—are to boycott all admissions activities on August 9 and 10 in Scotland, and on August 19 and 20 in England and Wales. This is the time when all Higher and A-level results are published. University authorities have offered a final pay increase offer of 3.5 percent. Staff, who held their first one-day strike against the offer last month, rejected this.

Russian air traffic controllers begin hunger strike

On June 14, Russian air traffic controllers in the Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad began a hunger strike to protest against low pay and non-payment of wages. The Kaliningrad Air Dispatchers Union called the hunger strike. The secretary of the union, Konstantin Kiselyov, said that the dispute was "mainly due to extremely low

wages and the officials' failure to clear salary arrears." He said that "controllers will report for work but refuse all food until their demands are fully met," and that the hunger strike was "likely to complicate air traffic control in western Russia".

According to the union, the workers will undergo a medical examination before going to work each day and those not deemed fit would not work. The Federal Aviation Service recently reported that the average monthly wage for controllers is about 2,600 roubles a month (\$100).

Czech air traffic controllers set to take industrial action

Czech air traffic controllers are set to strike this week in a dispute to demand the sacking of a director at the state-owned Rizeni Letoveho Provozu. The dispute arose when staff complained at the installation of a new radar system, which they said was unsatisfactory. Managers at the company said workers who demanded improvements in the system could face dismissal.

The Czech Air Traffic Controllers' Association (CZATCA) is presently in negotiations with management. It said that another concern of the workers was insufficient staffing, resulting in controllers being forced to work long overtime hours. CZATCA said a strike was to have begun on June 22, but Transport and Communications Minister Antonin Peltram had intervened and demanded to be briefed on the dispute. Jan Jirousek, a CZATCA representative, said, "The minister made a step ... meaning that he will come to learn about the situation in the afternoon. To give him time to analyse the situation we decided to postpone the strike."

Cypriot pilots strike to demand improved contract

On June 22 Cyprus Airways pilots took strike action for 24 hours in a dispute over their contract. The strike involved about 70 percent of the company's pilots and resulted in the grounding of 11 flights. The flights were mainly to European cities and affected about 3,000 passengers.

South African hotel workers strike

Employees of the Southern Sun Hotels, South Africa, carried out their third successive day of national protest on June 16 outside the Sandton Sun Inter-Continental. The five-star hotels hosted many of the guests and diplomats who came to the presidential inauguration of Thabo Mbeki.

The workers co-ordinated their action to coincide with the arrival of the diplomats to show their disapproval at the way the management had conducted negotiations with

the union, and the lack of response to any of their demands. After months of negotiation had led the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa nowhere, they came out on strike on June 11, demanding double-time on Sundays, job security and an 8.5 percent pay increase. Workers, who in some cases had worked a three-day week for the company for the last eight years, had not been offered full-time employment at the hotels. The protesters' activities were kept under close surveillance by a heavy police presence.

Super highway workers strike in South Africa

South African road workers building a super highway toll-road between Kaapmuiden and Komatipoort in Mpumalanga threatened to dig trenches across the new 2 billion rand (US\$3.34 billion) construction unless their demands were met. The 1,000 employees contracted by Stocks and Stocks, Basil Read (SBB) and Bouygues construction consortium went on an illegal strike, after SBB refused to lift their minimum wage from 4.15 rand per hour to 5.58 (US\$0.93) on Friday, June 18.

Zacharia Silawula, spokesman for the striking workers, said SBB did not provide safety equipment such as boots and overalls and also failed to pay bonuses when construction was running ahead of schedule. "We work right through public holidays and weekends to ensure that this road stays on target, but are not protected from injury or paid a decent wage." He continued, "Who can live on R4.15 a hour? That's only R336 (US\$56.18) for two weeks' back-breaking work."

The site manager for SBB said, "We are paying the legal minimum wage set down by the Mpumalanga government." Appealing to the new premier, Ndaweni Mahlangu, to step in to stop the strikers from ripping up the highway, he went on to say, "They are threatening to cut the corridor to pieces if their demands are not met ... and all we can do is dismiss them unless they get back to work!"



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