

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

15 July 1999

Italian government issues strike ban in the transport industry

On July 9 the Italian government of Massimo D'Alema issued a directive to airport and other transport workers banning strike activity from July 11 to July 27. The order follows a series of strikes in July by staff at airports throughout Italy.

Transport workers in Italy are already banned from striking during the majority of the tourist season after July 27, so the ruling means that workers at airports cannot take industrial action until the autumn.

The Italian Transport Ministry issued the directive in a statement that read, "The order was made necessary by the innumerable and disparate strikes proclaimed in the public transport sector across the country which have caused problems for people and have restricted their right to travel." The Transport Minister Tiziano Treu said, "One can't subject the citizens to continuous torture." He said that he would formally order workers on strike to return to work if necessary.

The statement warned that that the government would take action against any unions that opposed the order, including sanctions such as fines and penal action. Air transport union immediately complied with the order and called off a series of planned strikes.

Air traffic controllers at Palermo airport in Sicily had planned a four-hour stoppage the following day, while pilots and flight attendants at Meridiana airline had also planned to strike on July 10. Ground staff at Milan's Malpensa and Linate airports had been set to strike on July 11 and 12. A four-hour stoppage by flight attendants had also been planned for July 15.

Transport workers have been taking industrial action throughout the country to oppose government plans to cut jobs and lower overhead costs.

The government made its announcement banning strikes as a 24-hour strike by state railway workers was under way. Last week bus and tram drivers held a four-hour work stoppage in many cities, including Rome.

Treu said the government did not intervene to end the railway strike because it had been announced some time ago and the railway unions were involved in negotiations. He contrasted this to the airport workers and said, "On the other hand, in the air travel sector, there wasn't just one long-announced strike but a constant repetition of strikes ... each one of these little groups capable of blocking the entire national [air] traffic. This is not acceptable and doesn't even follow the rules."

Polish nurses end hunger strike

Last week 30,000 Polish nurses began a hunger strike in Poland to demand an increase in pay. The strike began on July 8 at 7 a.m., and was the latest in a series of protests to demand a 10 percent increase in their average monthly pay of 700 zloty (£105) and a more stable employment contract. The staff attended to patients while on hunger strike.

Lidia Jelen, the leader of a regional branch of the main nursing union OZZPP, said, "Around 30,000 nurses started their fasts at 7.00 a.m. [0500 GMT] this morning and we are expecting that by the end of the day the figure will reach 100,000."

The dispute ended on July 12 after the nurses union reached an agreement with the government. The agreement stipulates a 2 percent wage increase for 1999.

Following the agreement Bozena Banachowicz, the leader of the nurses union, called on the strikers to "suspend" their dispute.

The government has refused to allot funds for the pay rise and has insisted that nurses have to negotiate the increase from regional health managers.

A spokeswoman for the union said, "We are not satisfied because trade unions still have to negotiate the pay rise with local healthcare funds. If our demands were not met by the end of August, we would resume the protest but its form will be then even more radical."

Irish train drivers take unofficial strike action

On July 12, train drivers in Ireland took unofficial strike action affecting service between Dublin and Cork and Kerry. The strike was called by the Irish Locomotive Drivers' Association (ILDA) to demand that the union president, Chris Holbrook, receive a day's pay for time he spent at a disciplinary hearing, where he represented another driver 12 days ago.

The strike resulted in around 4,500 passengers using the railway routes affected instead of the usual 9,000. The workers have said that they will take further action against the company Iarnród Éireann unless their demand is met.

The strike was the second dispute based on the same issue. On July 9, drivers in Athlone took unofficial action that disrupted services. The drivers demanded that Brendan Ogle, the ILDA executive secretary, be given permission to represent a worker. The company said that it did not recognise the ILDA and that it had "no legal standing whatsoever".

Ogle said the company was "testing the ground and I think they have had their answer". He said ILDA executive would sanction further disruption unless the company gave written confirmation that representatives of the union were able to represent member of the union.

The ILDA represents about 120 members, a third of the drivers at Iarnród Éireann. The members of the union have opposed the firm's demands to introduce flexible working arrangements.

Strike wave looms in South Africa

* Two civil service unions—the National Education and Allied Workers' Union and the South African Democratic Teachers' Union—are planning to protest on Tuesday, July 13 in support of their demands for a 10 percent wage increase.

* In Middelburg in Mpumalanga four striking steelworkers were arrested during a National Union of Metalworkers picket outside Columbus Stainless. Although three of the steelworkers unions have already settled on a 7.1 percent increase, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) is holding out for an inflation-linked 7.7 percent increase, with 2 percent for performance. NUMSA has served seven-day notices that it intends to embark on secondary strike action in support of the 900 Columbus strikers. The action will target Columbus's joint owners, Samancor Highveld Steel and the Industrial

Development Corporation.

* Spoornet is planning thousands of job cuts as part of a massive restructuring effort, the company said on July 8. Unions said they would fight the job cuts by launching strike action from last Friday. "Rolling mass action" by some 40,000 rail employees was aimed at stopping the company from going ahead with the layoffs, Transport and Allied Workers' union President Bonakele Jonas told a news conference in Johannesburg. The South African Footplate Staff Association (SAFSA) has said that Spoornet aims to shed 27,000 jobs over the next two to three years.

Strike hits transport in Nairobi, Kenya

Drivers and conductors of Kenya's mini-buses in the capital Nairobi continued their strike into its fourth consecutive day on July 10. Traders complained of poor business, and most business premises remained closed. Customer turnout in supermarkets and restaurants in town was poor.

Banks also noted a slump in business. A bank worker said: "Usually at this time of the month, the workload is at its peak as many customers come to withdraw salaries."

Those working in the city have been arriving late due to the lack of transport. Some struggled aboard Kenya Bus Company vehicles, the only transport still running, but many waited hours at crowded bus stops.

The owners, drivers and touts for the mini-buses have gone on strike to protest against government plans for new licensing rules. They say the rules would increase operating costs and put many out of work.

Postal workers return to work in Sierra Leone

Postal workers returned to work July 7 following a strike for better pay and benefits. The workers earn the local equivalent of between US\$10 and \$20 a month. They were also demanding more promotions and medical benefits. The leaders of the Union of Postal and Telecommunications Services who called the strike refused to say whether they had succeeded in winning the workers' demands.



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