

# Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

22 July 1999

## **Railway guards in Britain to be balloted for industrial action**

Railway guards and conductors in Britain are to be balloted for strike action following a proposal by the national rail company, Railtrack, to change a key part of the guards' job. Railtrack announced this week that it is proposing to introduce a new rule next month which hands overall control from the guard to the train driver in the event of an incident.

A strike by Britain's 16,000 guards could lead to the first national rail strike in five years, since signal workers took industrial action. The Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) assistant general secretary, Bob Crow, said: "We expect an overwhelming 'yes' vote without any difficulty at all. We believe the travelling public want the guard to be responsible for the train and the driver to drive." The union has stated that the change could result in the introduction of driver-only trains that would threaten safety and lead to job losses. The strike ballot is to be held in two weeks and the result will be declared on August 25.

## **Hungarian university staff threaten strike**

Staff at the Budapest University of Medicine (SOTE) have threatened industrial action to demand a 13 percent pay increase. The trade union representing the workers said that staff could be called out indefinitely in September if its demands are not met. The union organises 6,600 employees at SOTE. The 13 percent pay rise had previously been agreed on a national basis, but has not been implemented in one third of the Hungarian healthcare institutions, according to the government Health Minister Arpad Gogl.

## **South African Court finds in favour of Gold Fields strikers**

On July 19, a South African court ruled against a bid by the mining company, Gold Fields, to have a strike by its miners declared illegal. Gold Fields is the world's second largest producer of gold.

More than 4,000 National Union of Mineworkers

members went on strike at the Oryx mine last Thursday, following mass layoffs due to a record slump in gold prices. Gold Fields originally applied to the Gold Crisis Committee to lay off up to 900 workers, but reduced the figure to 600 after talks with the union. The union's sole dispute is now the terms under which the laid-off workers will leave. The company is offering two weeks' pay for each year of service, while the NUM is demanding four months' pay for every year of service. On the period of notice, the NUM wants six months, while Gold Fields is offering six weeks.

## **200 workers arrested at Columbus Stainless**

A dispute at Columbus Stainless in South Africa erupted again Tuesday when close to 200 members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) on a legal strike were arrested and refused bail for being a "danger to society". Numsa said two workers were admitted to an intensive care unit after being shot by police. Dumisa Ntuli, a spokesman for Numsa, said: "It seems to us that the traditional methods of dealing with strikes are still being used by the police despite the changes in the country." Police fired rubber bullets and injured some of the employees.

Columbus Stainless is offering a 7.1 percent pay increase plus a 0.6 percent individual performance-based increment, against union demands of a 7.7 percent inflation-linked increase plus an improvement factor of not less than 2 percent. The company has already settled on its offer with three other recognised unions, including the all-white Mine Workers Union.

## **Mali union calls strike after talks fail**

Mali's main union said on Monday July 19 that it was to call a two-day strike from Tuesday after six days of talks with the government ended without a pay settlement. The National Union of Workers of Mali (UNTM) wanted a general 10 percent pay increase, while the government offered only five percent. The union is also demanding a cut in water and electricity tariffs and government action on what it called the

illegal rise in the cost of basic foods.

The UNTM said the government failed to honour an agreement signed in April 1998. The government raised wages by five percent, as agreed, but had not cut income tax or revised salary scales, which should have been done by June 1999.

### **Copperbelt Permanent Secretary orders “Sack striking nurses”**

The Zambian government has ordered the sacking of more than 140 nurses and other staff at Luanshya's Thompson Hospital if they do not end their strike. Copperbelt Permanent Secretary Arthur Yoyo confirmed that he had given instructions to the hospital board to sack workers if they did not “heed his advice” to return to work. He said the strike was illegal because workers had not exhausted the procedures laid down by labour laws, and that the Government would not negotiate with strikers.

The workers downed tools on Wednesday last week demanding the removal of the board members, saying they had run down the institution. Workers said health care had reached its lowest ebb and there was no point in continuing to work because there were no drugs at the hospital. Scores of people were dying for this reason, while the board members were only interested in awarding themselves contracts.

### **Zambia: ZULAWU members strike**

Council workers in Zambia began a nation-wide strike on July 19, after the Zambia United and Local Authorities Workers' Union (ZULAWU) declared it was in dispute with the government. Local government and housing minister Bennie Mwiinga admitted this was because his ministry had put conditions on the council employees' pay increase. The union rejected the conditions and declared a dispute.



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