

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

5 August 1999

Polish public sector workers strike

A strike by public sector workers, which paralysed the northwestern Polish city of Szczecin for four days, ended Saturday when the union reached an agreement with local authorities. Public transport workers and employees in the water and rubbish-collecting services went back to work after obtaining a guarantee of a pay rise in 2000.

Polish truckers protest fuel prices

Polish truckers blocked the streets of a number of cities for two hours Monday to protest increases in fuel prices. Serious traffic disruption built up after dozens of trucks drove at 5 kilometres per hour at key exit roads in cities including Gdansk in the north, Lodz in central Poland and Katowice in the south. Fuel prices rose Sunday for the thirteenth time this year. A litre of lead-free gasoline now costs an average of Zl 2.5 (0.6 euros).

Russian energy workers strike for unpaid wages

Nearly 12,000 workers at Dalenergo, the biggest energy supplier in the Vladivostok region of Russia, went on strike Monday claiming unpaid wages. The workers at the power stations and other facilities have not been paid for five months, with the company's debts to its employees totalling 125 million roubles (\$5 million). The strikers stopped doing repair work, traditionally carried out during the summer, and decided to end supplies of electricity and hot water to bodies owing money to Dalenergo—including Vladivostok, Nakhodka and Artiom town councils. But private citizens will continue to be supplied, the strikers promised.

Russian ship crew ends hunger strike

Twenty-eight crewmen on a Russian ship docked in the Philippines have ended a week-long hunger strike protesting pay cuts, crew members said Wednesday. The Russian crewmen of the *Vitaliy Kruchina* launched the hunger strike July 25, while they were en route from India to the Philippines with a cargo of salt. Five days later, they arrived in Zamboanga in the southern Philippines and the strike continued, chief mate Georgy Alexenko

said.

Alexenko said their employer, Ocean Inter-Business, based in the Russian town of Nakhodka, had cut their salaries by 20 percent. He said they only drank water during the hunger strike. "It was difficult but we had to do it," he said. The crewmen ended their hunger strike Monday after Ocean Inter-Business promised to pay what had been deducted from their paycheques, Alexenko said.

Protest over rest time at US-owned factory in Ireland

Workers at a US-owned factory in Limerick have served strike notice against management's arbitrary new rules to limit break times. A Labour Court conciliation meeting has failed to resolve what has become known as the "Time in Loo" dispute. More than 100 employees, members of SIPTU, and craft workers at Fulflex International, a producer of elastic tapes, threads and rings, have been suspended for failure to comply with new regulations which include the use of "swipe cards" to record time workers spend away from their work stations.

A company spokesman said that there was "widespread and persistent abuse" of reasonable rest allowance time. A spokesman for the workers said that the company had refused to negotiate on the new "swiping" system. Frank McDonnell, the SIPTU vice-chairman at the factory, said, "We served strike notice two weeks ago because of their failure to adhere to the procedural agreement in our original contract. Then they issued us with a new 24-point contract, which we were told we had to comply with, and they refused any negotiations."

French pilots strike at AOM

Striking pilots at French airline AOM carried out a four-day strike against AOM, the country's third largest airline, to demand an annual 2 percent pay increase over the next five years, which management has said it could not afford. The strike started last Friday and had been set to end the next day, but pilots unexpectedly extended it into Sunday and Monday. The walkout left hundreds of vacationers

stranded over part of one of the busiest travel weekends of the year.

An AOM spokeswoman gave no details about whether management and pilots had reached a deal. AOM is in the process of being purchased by the parent company of Swiss carrier Swissair and holding company Marine-Wendel.

Turkish union to strike over pension “reform”

A leading Turkish trade union, Turk-Is, said on Tuesday it would stage a one-day strike on Friday to protest against government plans to reform the pension system and raise the retirement age. Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit's plan is aimed at cutting the government spending deficit and is seen as a test of his ability to resist working class opposition. Turk-Is said last week it had made progress in talks with the government, but that there was still disagreement over the proposal to raise the minimum retirement age to 58 for women and 60 for men. Currently women and men in some occupations can retire as early as 38 and 43 respectively.

The social security system's deficit is expected to reach \$5.87 billion in 1999, piling pressure on the government to slash benefits in line with recommendations made by the International Monetary Fund. The IMF has linked a new Turkish loan package to government progress on social security, banking and agriculture reforms.

Walkout by Israeli water workers

Striking employees at Israel's state-owned water company walked out Tuesday over a dispute with the Treasury. “There is no water in Tel Aviv because water supply was stopped there this morning,” said Meir Eliezra, head of the Mekorot water company's workers union. He said water supply was also cut to towns in southern and central Israel from 6 a.m. in the strike scheduled to last for four hours.

Mekorot workers walked off the job three weeks ago in a protest over wages and plans by the government to privatise the company. Stoppages began after Mekorot workers rejected a Treasury proposal offering a 3 percent increase in annual wages. The Treasury said it would not give in to workers' demands and was determined to prevent them from breaking through the government wage limit for public sector workers.

Public sector strike in Congo

Civil servants in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, have been on strike for two days over the demand for a salary increase. The government promised to increase their salaries in June but failed to do so. The strikers planned a protest march to the office of

Finance Minister Mawampanga Mwana. The walkout expresses growing opposition to the regime of Laurent Kabila, which has plunged the country into economic ruin after the year-long war with Rwandan and Ugandan-backed rebel forces.

South African miners cannot sue British company for asbestos exposure

A judge in the British High Court ruled that 2,000 South African asbestos miners could not proceed in suing a British-based company, Cape, for asbestos-related diseases contracted over 20 years ago. The judge ruled that South Africa rather than Britain was “clearly and distinctly the more appropriate forum” for the case. This means that the claim for compensation for the miners will effectively be blocked because South African courts will not hear a case against a British company. Many of the miners are dying from asbestosis and the entire town of Prieska, where the asbestos was mined up until 1979, is still covered in deadly blue asbestos dust affecting the health of future generations.

The result was a victory for the many British companies which have been involved in extracting mineral wealth in unsafe and unhealthy conditions throughout the former empire. The lawyer representing the miners, Richard Meeran, said, “Commercial interests have prevailed over justice.... A British company which goes to South Africa and relies on the system of apartheid to exploit black workers—including young children—should properly be held accountable in Britain.”



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