

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

2 September 1999

National Irish Bank employees reject restructuring programme

Staff at the National Irish Bank are set to strike after rejecting a restructuring programme on August 27. The Irish Bank Officials Association representing the 500 workers has stated that it will pay the staff £100 a week if the company attempts to carry out the changes in working practises without discussions with the union. This is the first time that the union has ever agreed to award strike pay.

The National Irish Bank has said it will continue to try to negotiate with the IBOA over the restructuring programme. If no agreement is reached, strike action is due to commence on September 6. The bank has instructed its employees to sign new contracts by September 3.

The General Secretary of the IBOA, Larry Broderick, said that the changes proposed by the National Irish Bank "were very much out of line with the rest of the banking industry in Ireland. The introduction of the new pay and grading structure proposed by the bank will see the maximum pay for the vast majority of staff being cut from the present £26,000 per annum to £18,000."

French refuse collectors vote to continue strike

Striking garbage workers in the southern city of Marseilles continued their strike last week after rejecting a settlement between management and two trade unions. The strike began two weeks ago over pay. The garbage collectors are employed by a private haulage company and collect rubbish in the city's 13th and 14th districts.

On August 27, management and two of the three unions involved in the dispute signed an agreement to end the dispute. The strikers rejected the agreement the next day and voted to continue the strike. On August 29, the city's mayor, Jean-Claude Gaudin, said he may call in troops to clear the mounting garbage heaps.

Polish coal miners oppose pit closures, job losses

Coal miners in Poland held workplace protests on August 30 to oppose the government's threat to close up to 50 mines. Miners held brief workplace meetings in many of Poland's 50 underground coal mines. The action was called by a coalition of 12 trade union, who had originally threatened to call the miners out on a nation-wide two-hour "warning" strike.

Jan Kisielinski, the leader of the Miners' Trade Union, the biggest of the mining unions, said that 50,000 of Poland's 190,000 miners took part in the protest. "The action was to be a warning sign for the government. There will be more protests ... including an indefinite strike unless the government begins serious negotiations with us," he said.

The miners are opposing government measures to quickly close down loss-making mines and to shed thousands of jobs. Under the plan, half of the country's mines are to be closed and some 115,000 miners made redundant.

Hungarian rail company and unions sign deal to prevent strike

Last week, an agreement between the Hungarian state railway company MAV Rt and three rail unions averted a planned strike. On August 25, the parties agreed a new pay deal that reduces wage differentials in the industry. VDSZSZ rail workers' union spokesman Balint Lukacsi said, "The strike committee approved the plan of the agreement and decided to withdraw the general strike announced for the 26th [of August]."

The deal stipulates that from January MAV Rt would end wage differences between employees represented by the VDSZSZ and the other rail unions. The VDSZSZ had originally demanded a 17.96 percent rise for its 25,000 members from December 1. The union has now agreed to put this date back by a month. That percentage was the increase for 35,000 other railway workers, which took effect last January 1.

British health service workers reject government pay offer

Last week, members of the MSF trade union employed in the National Health Service (NHS) voted by a 3-1 margin to reject a government-backed 3 percent pay offer. The union represents 65,000 workers in the NHS. MSF pathology members rejected the offer by a 7-2 margin, while the vote by Medical Technical Officers was by more than 4-1.

The union's Head of Health, Roger Kline, said, "The result of the ballot—one of the largest-ever turnouts of MSF's health service members—is a clear mandate to step up the campaign which also includes the demand for Pay Review Body status for all scientific and technical staff." He also stated that "some form of industrial action can't be ruled out". Recently, members of two others unions, the GMB and UNISON, also voted to reject the 3 percent pay offer.

Kenyan teachers threaten to boycott classes

Kenyan teachers have threatened to boycott classes when the new school term opens on September 6. They are protesting against the government's failure to pay August's wages to several hundred staff. The government has justified this on the grounds there are "appointment irregularities"—the existence of "ghost workers" on schools' payrolls. Several hundred teachers were found without identity cards, academic and professional certificates, letters of appointment and letters indicating promotion from one grade to another.

The secretary general of the Kenya National Union of Teachers, Ambrose Adongo, described the government's intended move as "human torture". He gave the Teachers Service Commission until September 4 to pay all teachers' salaries.

South African coal and gold miners strike ends

10,000 coal and gold miners returned to work this week after wage settlements ended a weeklong strike. The miners stopped work last Friday at South Africa's two main coal producers and some minor gold mines. The National Union of Mineworkers and Anglo Coal, which owns nine mines, settled on an 8 percent wage increase last Thursday. Over 4,000 workers from the four collieries owned by Ingwe reached a similar settlement earlier. The NUM had initially demanded a 9 percent raise and rejected a 7.5 percent offer by management. The wage increase will be 1 percent above inflation for next year.

SA Post Office postpones lock-out

The South African Post Office agreed on Thursday

last week to hold off its decision to lock out striking workers pending further discussions with the Communication Workers Union. The CWU has rejected pay rises of 10.01 percent for the lowest-paid workers and 7 percent for higher grades. It is demanding increases of 14 percent and 10 percent.



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