Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

23 September 1999

French workers strike at tyre manufacturer

On September 21, workers at the French tyre maker Michelin took strike action for 24 hours to protest against 7,500 jobs being shed by the company across Europe. Some 10 percent of the company's continental workforce are to be laid off over three years.

Workers struck in the city of Clermont-Ferrand and four other French cities. The CFDT, CGT and FO unions, which represent just 5 percent of the company's workforce, called the strike. In Clermont-Ferrand, the hometown of Michelin, 4,000 workers marched through the town centre to protest. There are 15,000 Michelin workers at five factories in the town known as “Michelinville”.

Michelin defended the cuts by saying that they are necessary to defend its market share from Japanese and US competition. The company employs some 125,000 people world-wide and recently posted a 17 percent rise in net profits for the first half of 1999.

German postal workers protest post office closures

Around 20,000 post offices workers took part in demonstrations and protest meetings throughout Germany on September 16. The workers were protesting against the planned closure by Post AG of 2,000 out of 14,000 post offices nationally. The planned closures are part of the strategy of Post AG management to float the post office on the stock markets within the next few months. Workers fear that the closures will result in many staff losing their jobs, leading to an increase in productivity and pressure on those who remain.

Electricians in London take unofficial strike action

Electricians working on the London Underground Jubilee Line Extension to the Millennium Dome and other major projects took unofficial strike action on September 21. Some 490 workers walked off the job to demand an increase in pay and in opposition to concessions made to management by their union, the AEEU. The main employers' association, the Electrical Contracting Association, made a pay offer that would increase the national hourly rate from £7.42 to £8.92, but included reductions in weekend overtime and travel allowances. Other construction sites affected by the dispute were the Millennium Dome and the Royal Opera House.

The strike was immediately condemned by AEEU leader, Sir Ken Jackson, as "totally unnecessary". Speaking at the annual TUC conference last week, Jackson had called for a "strike free future for British industry".

Irish nurses to be balloted for strike action

Nurses are to be balloted for strike action on September 29 in a dispute over pay. The nurses plan to strike for 24 hours on October 19 and to march in uniform to the Irish Parliament three days later to publicise their pay claim. The Labour Court has made recommendations to settle the dispute, which the nurses are expected to turn down. Three out of four unions involved have already rejected the Labour Court proposals.

Anti-government protest banned in Poland

On September 16, the leader of the city council in Warsaw announced that he was banning a planned anti-government demonstration in the city. Pawel Piskorski, the president of the Warsaw council, said that the planned September 24 demonstration could not take place because the expected 100,000 protestors would cause damage and paralyse the city. Piskorski said that "we cannot have a situation where the right to demonstrate limits the freedoms of the citizens of Warsaw".

The demonstration was to have been a joint protest organised by the farmers union Samoobrona, the OPZZ trade union and several health workers organisations against the Polish governments' "reform" programmes.

Zimbabwean catering workers strike ended

Twenty thousand catering workers have ended their pay strike without any agreement. The Zimbabwe Catering and Hotel Workers Union have proclaimed the dispute a success solely because employers have agreed to negotiate. Restaurants and fast-food outlets were closed for eight days last week, while in the hotels managerial staff attempted to carry on providing basic services to guests.

The dispute arose because employers had wanted to negotiate percentage increases based on the minimum level of wages earned, rather than current levels. The union claims that employers have now accepted the latter, but the difference between workers' demands (based on an inflation rate of 68 percent) and the employers' offer of 28 percent remains as wide as ever. Negotiations are to begin on Monday.

South Africa: Strike at Barlows

Two hundred workers allied to the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) at Barlows Equipment Company in Isando have begun strike action. The workers had demanded a pay rise of 10.5 percent, a 40-hour week and a moratorium on retrenchments. The company had offered only a 7.5 percent rise. Dumisa Ntuli, a Numsa spokesman, said: "Workers are utterly disgusted that the management of the company has negotiated in bad faith [and] believe that the current deadlock will result in serious hostilities and plant instability."

Cosatu backs down on strike action

On Monday, Cosatu's teaching, health and police affiliates, along with nine other public service unions, threatened to draw private sector workers into a national public service dispute in protest at the government's unilateral implementation of an average 6.3 percent increase.

By Wednesday, Cosatu had dropped its threat. At a news conference union leaders welcomed President Mbeki's statement that the government wanted a negotiated settlement to the three-month-old dispute. They claimed that this, along with similar remarks by Deputy President Zuma, had restored their faith in the government's commitment to collective bargaining.

Mbeki's office rejected that this was its position, and said that Cosatu's assumption that the government was willing to resume talks on public service pay was wrong. Subsequently Telkom's Directory Services (TDS) said it would lock out workers at the end of the week after the service staff and the Communication Workers Union reached a deadlock in salary negotiations.

Unemployment increases labour unrest in South Africa

Employment in South Africa's non-agricultural sector declined 0.8 percent in the year to March, with 42,000 jobs lost, according to the quarterly report of the Reserve Bank. The gold mining and construction sectors were hardest hit by job losses, the bank said. They put the shrinkage down to weak growth, pressures on domestic producers to be more internationally competitive, increased labour costs and a curb on the growth of the public sector. The bank said that between the last quarter of 1998 and the first quarter of 1999 employment fell 14.6 percent in the gold mining sector, 15.3 percent in construction and 8.6 percent in the financial sector. Public sector employment contracted by 0.4 percent and job losses in the private sector were at 2.4 percent in the first quarter of this year. However service sector jobs in catering and accommodation rose by 17.5 percent.

Unemployment in South Africa is now around 30 percent. The Reserve Bank commented that, despite this, wage demands "remained firm". "In such a situation, industrial action flared up and the number of workdays lost through strikes and work stoppages increased by about 32 percent from the first half of 1998 to the first half of 1999," it said.

Placer Dome in South Africa to lay off another 3,000 miners

Placer Dome Western Areas Joint Venture, South Africa, is to retrench close to 3,000 miners—about 40 percent of its workforce. The retrenchments come after the closure of the East Rand Proprietary Mines, which saw 5,000 miners lose their jobs as the declining gold price continues to take effect. The majority of the miners are from Mozambique. The company claims to have allocated more than 10 million rand towards a social plan, and that 70 percent of those laid off this time will be earning “a livelihood” within two years. The only response from the National Union of Mineworkers was that it would refer the layoffs to the Labour Court because management had not followed proper consultation process.