

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

28 October 1999

Polish miners protest against pit closures

On October 21 miners in the Silesia region in Poland blocked two railway hubs in a protest against government plans to close two mines. Around 600 miners joined the blockades, which prevented rail traffic from passing through the Tarnowskie Gory and Lazy region. The government called on the Interior Ministry to end the blockade.

Hundreds of miners at another pit in the area that is on the closure list also struck for two hours and threatened further action if the government tried to forcibly end the protests. One of the unions involved in the protests, the miners' Solidarity union, has not opposed the pit closures and the privatisation of the industry but has expressed concern over the pace of the changes. Henryk Nakonieczny, the head of the union, said, "We are also waiting for concrete proposals on the social aspects of reform, including the creation of alternative jobs and pensions for those who want to leave."

Sixty miners at the Siersza coal mine in Trzebinia in southern Poland have begun an underground occupation of the mine, which is due to be closed November 1. Management claims that all 1,600 workers at the pit will be provided with alternative jobs or benefits. The occupation was still under way on October 27.

British train guards union calls off strike

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) in Britain has called off a one-day strike by train guards, following a ruling by the High Court that the planned action was illegal. The strike was planned for October 29, following an 84 percent vote in favour by the 13,000 guards. The guards voted to strike to oppose new measures that will remove responsibility for safety on the train from the guard to the driver.

Following the ruling on October 23, RMT General Secretary Jimmy Knapp said: "The ruling has far-reaching consequences in that we now have the

desperate situation whereby Railtrack can issue edicts which drastically change our members' conditions of service and we have no redress."

Three of the companies who would have been hit by the strike—Virgin, South-West Trains and Connex South East—had argued that they were implementing a rule change imposed on them by Railtrack. They sought an injunction against the strike on the grounds that it was not the result of a dispute between the guards and their employers.

The High Court ruling only applied to England, but the RMT then said it would also call off the strike by guards in Scotland, which was also scheduled for October 29. The union has tried to justify this on the basis that it was likely that a similar ruling would be accepted at the Court of Session in Edinburgh if train companies in Scotland took out an injunction.

Bosnian workers demand payment of wages and lower taxes

On October 25, 20,000 workers and pensioners from across Bosnia protested against the government. The demands of the demonstration were for workers to receive unpaid wages, for an end to high taxes and for the creation of more jobs. The protest was organised by a number of trade unions. Thousands of workers have gone for months without receiving any pay, while unemployment has risen by 40 percent since 1995. The trade unions have stated that further demonstrations and strikes will take place unless their demands are addressed within one month.

Thousands of striking nurses march in Ireland

Ten thousand nurses marched through Dublin on October 21 on the third day of a national nurses' strike in Ireland. The country's 27,000 nurses are striking to demand an increase in pay. Some of those in attendance chanted anti-government slogans and singled out Health Minister Brian Cowen, in particular, for denunciation.

The government is hoping to reach a settlement to

end the dispute this week. On October 26, as the strike entered its eighth day, the Labour Court, the mediator of disputes in Ireland, had drawn up proposals after hours of talks with representatives of the government and nurses' union officials. One of the proposals is to introduce a new senior staff nurse grade. The proposals were to be discussed by the leaders of the four unions involved in the dispute yesterday. Although the strike has hit all the major hospitals in Ireland, with only emergency treatment provided, a recent opinion poll found that more than two-thirds of those questioned blamed the government and not the nurses for the strike.

Ghanaian tanker drivers attacked

The Ghanaian Petroleum Tanker Drivers Association has called strike action in response to a brutal attack on its members and offices. In a police and military exercise on October 20 at the Tema Oil Refinery, about 25 kilometres east of Accra, drivers were arrested and injured. Association National Secretary Daniel Kabuti said that at about 10:30 a.m. police and soldiers invaded the refinery and started beating people indiscriminately. The joint force entered the association's offices, driving members out and arresting most of them. Police and military personnel bashed workers with truncheons and gun butts and stamped on them with their boots. The tanker drivers had been going about their normal work when attacked.

The reason given for the attack, of which the management were given prior notice, was an exercise aimed at arresting suspected criminals at the refinery, Tema Fishing Harbour and the Main Harbour areas. The drivers said it was wrong for the police "to attack and mercilessly brutalise them and their mates". The refinery has been forced to close its loading point as the drivers have refused to carry on working, leaving their tanker trucks in the refinery yard. They blocked the main road to other heavy industries, including the Volta Aluminium Company, for an hour.

Wilfred Gbormitah, national association chairman, said its members will not work until all their arrested colleagues are released unconditionally, those wounded compensated and a formal apology rendered by whomever ordered the exercise. The management was in negotiations with the tanker drivers' leaders on October 21 in an attempt to get the men back to work.

South African telecom company to shed 11,000

jobs

South Africa's telecommunications company, Telkom, hopes to complete the reduction of its work force by 11,000 in the next two months, in preparation for deregulation of the telephone market. The Alliance of Telkom Unions said that by March next year the company will have cut the jobs, either as a result of natural attrition, voluntary retrenchment packages, outsourcing or compulsory redundancy.

The unions have been told that 5,699 employees have been identified for dismissal, most of them among the lowest paid workers. Telkom is to remove another 2,600 jobs through outsourcing, (new companies set up to do contract work for Telkom) or through redundancies. On top of the 8,299 identified jobs to go, 2,000 voluntary redundancies have already been made since last March. The job losses are part of the African National Congress government's proposals to cut hundreds of thousands of jobs in the state and semi-state sectors in preparation for privatisation.



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