

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

11 November 1999

Airport baggage handlers in Belgium strike for better pay and conditions

On November 5, 700 baggage handlers at Brussels international airport in Belgium began strike action to demand better pay and conditions. The workers are employed by the service company AviaPartner and have refused to load luggage or clean aircraft during the dispute. The strike forced the cancellation and disruption of a number of flights. Other airlines such as BAY.L, Alitalia, Air France and Turkish Airlines, who also use AviaPartner, were affected by the strike.

During the ongoing dispute flights were diverted to airports at Charleroi, Liege, Lille and Ostend.

Alitalia said that they were recalling staff who were on leave, in order to get them to unload baggage and clean aircraft.

The dispute continued into this week. Arbitration talks were held between the company and union representatives on November 8, but the dispute has continued. Prior to the negotiations, Christine Karels, a spokeswoman for AviaPartner, said, "We will listen but ... our position remains unchanged. We cannot allow ourselves to give in, as it will cost us customers in this competitive business. We are already very uncomfortable."

Italian petrol station attendants vote to strike

Petrol station attendants in Italy have voted to strike for a total of 16 days, with the first four-day strike due to begin on November 16. The industrial action is expected to continue up until and possibly through the Christmas holidays. The strikes have been called in protest at government plans to deregulate the industry.

In response, an official government body on industrial action has ruled the strikes illegal, on the pretext that fuel provision is an essential public service and that the Italian constitution enshrined the right to mobility. The committee issued a statement on the proposed strike that said, "The committee has decided the strike in its present form is illegal and has invited the unions to reduce the duration of the action and to guarantee essential services".

Last week, the government legislated on new laws cutting fuel taxes in preparation for the deregulation of the petroleum distribution system.

The various trade unions that have called the strikes issued a statement pointing out that the new laws will lead to the establishment of thousands of smaller petroleum distribution outlets, leading to a decline in the service. Their statement read, "Such a complex network will immediately trigger a marked

rise in prices for the public and a worrying decline in professionalism and is aimed solely at benefiting big economic interests and putting 100,000 people out of work, without any advantage for Italian consumers."

The government is set to open talks with trade union representatives of the petrol station assistants in a bid to prevent the strike.

Irish nurses vote to accept pay deal

On November 5, nurses in Ireland who have recently been involved in their first-ever national strike voted to accept a new pay deal, ending the dispute. The 28,000 nurses voted by a margin of around 2-1 to accept the agreement.

The nine-day strike began in mid-October and was ended on October 27 following negotiations between the Labour Court, the government and the unions representing the nurses. The pay deal is estimated to have cost the government 120-190 million Irish punts (\$158.5-251 million) and has created a new grade of senior staff nurse.

Union leaders called off strike action immediately upon the deal being broached by the Labour Court, before their members even had time to consider the proposals. Despite the vote, many nurses argue that the deal does not go far enough in addressing a long-term imbalance between this and other sectors.

Toolmakers strike at Ford UK plant

On November 9, 400 toolmakers at Ford UK's Dagenham plant near London struck for one day to demand an increase in pay. The strike was called by the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) and disrupted production of the Ford Fiesta model at the company's main plant.

The strike is expected to be the first of several one-day stoppages after the AEEU rejected Ford's initial 2 percent pay offer. The strike was organised to coincide with pay negotiations between Ford managers and union representatives this week.

British Telecom call centre workers set to vote on strike action

More than 4,000 workers at British Telecoms (BT) 37 call centre sites in the UK are expected to vote for industrial action this week, in opposition to an increasing level of monitoring and surveillance of the workforce by the company. The workers deal with customer inquiries about bills and repairs.

The Communication Workers Union called the strike ballot, and if successful, the first one-day strike will take place on November 22.

Staff are angry at the stress and anxiety caused by BT's limit of four minutes and 40 seconds to deal with each call. Workers at the company are monitored on all aspects of their job, even on how long they spend in the lavatory.

Swaziland TV workers face punishment for strike

Six suspended workers at the Swaziland Television Broadcasting Corporation (STBC) will appear before a disciplinary board on November 23. They are: Lwazi Hlope, a technician and president of the Swaziland Media and Publishers Workers Union (SMEPAWU); Bheki Thwala and Fanlakhe Sikhondze, both technicians; Sam Lukhele, a journalist; Mvumeni Khumalo, a sound engineer; and camera operator Bhitani Dlamini.

It is alleged that two journalists were threatened and forced to leave their posts last month during a strike by workers at STBC. The six workers have been suspended without pay, apparently because of their involvement in the strike. They are alleged to be responsible for the news blackout and staff occupation of the studios.

According to reports, the striking workers stormed the television studios, locked all the doors and took control of everything. As a result, no news was broadcast on October 28, but most of the other programmes were kept on air.

The strike was prompted by non-payment of wages, with workers demanding a 7 percent backdated pay rise. Management said they would receive this with their November salaries, but SMEPAWU initially went ahead with the strike action to demand payment. The strike was abandoned on the morning of October 29, as it would be declared illegal. About 75 percent of workers at STBC joined the strike on October 28.

Workers protest in Enugu State, Nigeria

The Enugu State Government in Nigeria warned civil servants to keep the peace and abide by the law. Outraged workers in Enugu State stormed official buildings yesterday, sacking the offices of commissioners and permanent secretaries after the government announced measures intending to trim the workers' strength.

The Commissioner for Information and Culture described the workers' action as illegal. In a one-page statement, Eze said: "It has come to the attention of the state government that some workers have once more invaded the state secretariat, forcing their employers out of office. Other law-abiding workers going about their lawful duties were equally barred from entering their offices."

The statement, titled: "Illegal actions by Enugu State civil servants," reads in part:

* "It is the prerogative of the employer, not the employee, to use lock-out as an instrument of trade dispute

* all workers are advised to return to work immediately in their own interest, since no trade dispute has been declared by labour in Enugu State

* security arrangements have been put in place to ensure the safe passage of workers lawfully reporting for duty

* government views seriously the militancy which has characterised labour actions in the state

* labour cannot be the employer and the employee at the same time—labour cannot lock government offices.

* the security agencies have been briefed to ensure that labour conducts its affairs within the limits of the law and that never again shall labour be allowed to take laws into their hands

Ugandan school and college closed after riots

A total of 34 students from St. Peter's College, Tororo were arrested and others sent back to their homes following a strike last Friday night in which the headmaster's house was allegedly burnt to ashes. The headmaster, Mr. Sisye Mpyangu, was not in the school when the students started the strike, protesting the hiking of fees from 160,000 to 205,000 Ugandan shillings (\$107-137) per term. The strike followed a week of tension in the school, in which students had already protested against the introduction of a sh15,000 (\$10) fee for compulsory computer classes.

One student said there was no way the more than 1,000 students could benefit from the five computers in the school. He said the fee meant the school could have reaped an extra sh15million (\$10,000) per term.

Tororo police had arrested 34 students, who were only released on Sunday evening. The school was still being guarded by anti-riot police yesterday.

Police and education authorities in the Tororo district have also closed Mulagi Girls' Secondary School in Bunyole, following a riot by the students after they were fed rotten food.

On November 5, the students rejected a posho meal (a Ugandan dish), saying it was full of maggots. The district education officer Mr. Yona Doya, confirmed the students went on strike opposing the poor quality of the posho. He said police were called in to quell the riot and the students sent off to their homes.

Yona Doya said in Mulagi the students caused no damage, and that those from other classes would also return soon to sit their end-of-year examinations. He added that the school had returned the posho to an undisclosed supplier in Mbale.



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