

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

30 March 2000

Finnish chemical workers end week-long strike

Finnish chemical workers ended their week-long strike on March 22. Under the back-to-work deal the workers will receive an increase in hourly pay in an agreement brokered by the National Labour Conciliator Juhani Salenius.

Industry employers said that this represented a rise in earnings during the first year of around 3.9 percent. The Saturday following Ascension Day will now become a paid holiday. During negotiations the Chemical Workers' Union dropped one of the main demands of the dispute, shorter working hours.

The strike was settled at the point when 7,000 workers in the plastics and chemical products industry were set to join the dispute. This would have disrupted the production and distribution of gas, impacting on other industries.

Unofficial postal workers strike ends in Scotland

Postal workers in Edinburgh returned to work on March 28 after their unofficial strike action ended. The strike resulted in half a million letters being undelivered and the backlog should be cleared by March 30. The dispute is the twentieth walkout in the city in the last four years.

The strike began on March 25 when 120 delivery workers protested against an extension to their Saturday duty hours at the city's North-West delivery office. On March 28, 700 other postal staff from offices around the city joined the strike.

The workers have said that the strike is the culmination of many months of frustration and came to a head over the issue of extended Saturday working. One of the strikers said, "This was nothing to do with money."

A Royal Mail spokesman condemned the strike and said that the company and the Communication Workers Union, which represents the workers, had worked together for a number of years "to prevent this kind of irresponsible strike action". He continued, "We have to

ask the union why members decided to take this kind of action that heaps misery on customers. A certain element continue to be intent on wrecking agreements and standing in the way of deals which will not only improve services but bring benefits to members of staff."

The strike was called off at a meeting of 200 of the workers who voted for a return to work. A district branch secretary of the Communication Workers Union said that the company and the union would now resolve the issue of Saturday working.

Scottish bus drivers strike continues

On March 27, 500 Stagecoach Bus drivers in south-west Scotland struck for 24 hours. This was the fourth strike over a pay dispute. The drivers began their action after rejecting Stagecoach's backdated pay increase of around 9.1 percent over the next 18 months.

The majority of services in the region were disrupted, particularly those taking children to school and commuter routes throughout Dumfries, Galloway and Ayrshire. The bus workers have continued the strike in opposition to the trade union representing them, the Transport and General Workers Union, which recommended acceptance of the original pay offer.

British NHS technicians and scientists reject pay offer

Technicians and scientists working in the National Health Service have voted to reject the government's pay offer of a 3.25 percent pay increase this year. The 30,000 members of the Manufacturing, Science and Finance (MSF) union voted in a ballot by a margin of 5 to 1 to reject the pay offer.

The workers say their salaries have fallen behind other groups of professionals by as much as 30 percent in the last 15 years. An average starting salary for a cytologist, who tests human cells for cancer, is £10,843, while a Medical Technical Officer, who has responsibility for monitoring equipment in operating theatres and working with patients with heart disease, is

paid a basic salary of £10,090.

The scientists and technicians are not included in the NHS pay review body, even though they are essential NHS workers. MSF has pointed out that government targets on cutting heart disease and cancer death are not possible to achieve without the cooperation of scientific and technical staff.

Teachers strike for unpaid wages in Sierra Leone

Schools in Sierra Leone were closed last week by a nation-wide teachers strike. The strike action was organised by the Sierra Leone Teacher's Union (SLTU) after months of discussion with educational authorities over unpaid wages. SLTU claims the government owes teachers six months of salaries and wages. Education Minister Alpha Wurie said the strike was illegal and unpatriotic.

Liberian government threatens protesting journalists

The government last week described journalists protesting its attempts to clamp down on media freedom as "dissident" and issued a series of threats.

In a statement read on President Charles Taylor's radio station, the government said it was reminding Liberians of the "persistent anti-patriotic reporting of ... tabloid publications that are abusing freedom of the press, creating hatred in the society and preventing investors from coming to the country."

Journalists at the *News* took action last week against the closure of the independent *Star Radio* and *Radio Veritas*, a Catholic radio station. Management of the *News* issued a statement "humbly urging the government to clarify its allegation to substantiate that the *News*, or any other truly independent newspaper, is engaged in 'dissident activities' in the country".

Last weekend, the Press Union of Liberia lifted the March 20 news embargo on reporting government activities as part of its protest against the "illegal and arbitrary" closure of the two radio stations. The union said the lifting of the embargo was "aimed at encouraging an amicable solution to the strained relations between the independent media and the government." It added that while it welcomed the reopening of *Radio Veritas*, it was "still prevailing on the government to reopen *Star Radio*."

Strike by 11,000 in South Africa halts gold mining for a day

Eleven thousand South African gold miners stayed

away from work on Wednesday in a one-day strike at Free State gold mines to protest against job losses and poverty. Gold Fields' mining operations at the Beatrix, St. Helena and Oryx mines ground to a halt.

Gold Fields estimated the one-day action would cost St. Helena about 1.5 million rand in lost revenue, Beatrix about R3.6 million, and Oryx roughly R1 million. Total one-day output from the three mines is about 111kg of gold. At Harmony Gold, 9,000 mineworkers at the mine backed the one-day strike, closing down operations.

A National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) spokesperson said the strike was part of a campaign against unemployment launched by the 1.8 million-member Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). The protest has comprised sectional one-day strikes in several provinces and is to climax in a national strike on May 10.

The NUM has about 50,000 members in the Free State, one of the country's richest gold belts. At their peak, gold mines were the backbone of the country's economy, employing 530,000 miners in 1987. Following the end of apartheid in 1994, however, South Africa's economy has been opened up to global pressures for greater productivity, resulting in massive downsizing. Coupled with a steadily declining gold price, this has led to the decimation of the gold mining workforce to around 200,000 today.



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