

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

6 April 2000

French aluminium workers end strike over working hours

French smelting workers employed by the packaging and aluminium manufacturer Pechiney ended their five-week strike on March 27. The workers had been on strike at the firm's aluminium plant in Dunkirk in a dispute over the implementation of the new 35-hour working week legislation in France. No agreement has yet been reached on the issue of working hours. The company has simply stated that "after consultations" it is committed to implementing the 35-hour week.

Finnish transport workers strike ends

Finnish transport workers ended their five-day strike for increased wages on April 3. The main union involved in the dispute signed an agreement with management that had been proposed by the national incomes conciliator Juhani Salonius.

The main aspect of the agreement is an extension of the new contract from a period of just 10 months to three years. Under the new deal, transport workers will receive a 3.5 percent pay rise this month and another 1.4 percent in October. In addition bus drivers in the Tampere area, who have been on strike for four weeks, have won an increase of FIM 2.2 in their hourly wage.

The transport strike involved around 10,000 workers at 70 bus and road haulage companies and 12 freight terminals. Many companies imposed a lockout. More than 5,000 dockworkers and members of the seamen's union took strike action in support of the transport workers, closing down ports and port trade.

The strike had a big impact on other industries affected by lack of supplies, as well as leading to heavy traffic jams in many areas. Some paper mills were on the verge of closure because of lack of storage space, as products could not be shipped out to customers or ports. Europe's top paper maker, Stora Enso, had to shut down its largest paper machine temporarily and warned that another two would be switched off if the strike continued. Several employers' organisations have

demanded legislation to make sympathy strikes illegal.

Irish bus workers strike ended, rail workers take unofficial action

On April 3, bus workers in Dublin ended their month-long dispute following an agreement between the National Bus and Railworkers' Union (NBRU) and management, reached in consultation with the Labour Relations Commission. The dispute was ended on the day that a further four-day strike had been scheduled to start. Last week the bus drivers struck for 72 hours.

A full agreement has yet to be finalised, but the provisional agreement stipulates that the 2,000 bus drivers will receive an immediate pay increase of £28.74 a week. The agreement also specifies that Dublin Bus is to make cost savings of £4.5 million and it is expected that drivers will see their working duties rescheduled. A working group has been set up to examine the drivers' original demand for a 20 percent pay increase. The working group is to report back with its findings to the Labour Relations Commission by May 1. The £28.74 represents a pay increase of just 8.5 percent. The NBRU has now put the agreement to a ballot of its members.

On March 27, rail workers also took unofficial strike action, demanding a pay increase of 30 percent.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions called for an end to unofficial industrial action by the staff. The employers' federation IBEC called for the army to be drafted in to assist in the movement of the estimated 200,000 commuters who were stranded during the strike.

Teachers strike in Sierra Leone

Teachers in Sierra Leone who have not been paid this year began a strike last week. Police fired in the air and arrested about 50 primary and secondary school students during a protest demanding that the government pay teachers' wages so that state schools could reopen. Students who rioted in the capital Freetown on April 3 were detained on charges of

damaging property. Protesters stoned private schools, forcing pupils and teachers to flee. The protesters said that children of government ministers and officials all attended private schools, which have not been affected by the teachers' strike.

Swazi television station fires 31 striking employees

The Swaziland Television Authority sacked 31 employees at the end of last month for going on strike over salary increases due last October. The employees were dismissed while still under a suspension imposed in late 1999. During the strike, the workers invaded studios at the station causing a news blackout.

The dismissals were served directly after a disciplinary committee hearing. Though instigated by management, the committee had ruled mainly in favour of the workers. Police were sent into the television station in case of trouble. The workers had been led to believe that the ruling of the disciplinary committee hearing was final. Although some of the workers were cleared of all the charges against them, they were fired as well.

One month ago, close to 80 employees of the *Swazi Observer* newspaper suffered the same fate, losing their jobs due to the government's closure of the newspaper without notice.

Tunisian president pardons students, keeps workers in jail

Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has pardoned nine high school students sentenced to jail following demonstrations held in early February in Jebeniana, 230 kilometres south of the capital, Tunis. Rumours of price hikes on certain primary commodities such as bread and gas, and the scrapping of "second chance" end-of-year exams in primary and secondary education, caused the unrest. The authorities denied the rumours.

Out of some 40 people arrested during the unrest, 26 were sentenced on March 8 to jail terms of four to six months for "degradation of private and public goods". While the students arrested are all being released, 17 workers arrested for joining the protest are still being detained.



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