

# Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

12 May 2000

## **Public sector workers in Germany strike for pay rise**

Thousands of public sector workers took strike action on May 4 in Berlin and other cities as part of a campaign to demand a 5 percent increase in pay. The strike included workers on buses, trams and underground trains, garbage collectors and in schools.

The government has offered an inflation-based pay increase of around 1.2 percent in 2000 and 0.7 percent in 2001.

In Berlin, 15,000 workers from the capital's public transport, rubbish collection and utilities services walked off the job for several hours in the morning. The strike affected commuters and many chose to drive into work, creating long traffic jams.

Workers struck in other cities including Dresden, Frankfurt, Bremen, Hamburg, Saarbruecken and Munich.

Herbert Mai, leader of the 3.1 million-member OeTV public sector union, said that the union would be willing to lower its pay demands in further talks with government representatives. Mai said, "Of course our 5 percent demand will not be the end result. We are willing to be flexible. But we will not accept the status quo or a reduction to the inflation rate." Interior Minister Otto Schily said that there would be no pay increase above that of the inflation rate.

## **Bulgarian airline pilots strike over pay and conditions**

On May 3, pilots at the main Bulgarian airline, Balkan Airlines, began strike action to demand better wages and safety conditions. All of the company's 260 pilots were involved in the dispute. On the first and second day of the strike, all 29 Balkan flights to and from Sofia were cancelled. Further cancellations and delays took place on the third day of the strike.

David Golan, the head of the Balkan board representing Balkan's majority owners, Israel's Zeevi Holdings, has called on the workers to end the strike

before any talks take place on their demands. He said that those not returning to work on May 5 would face disciplinary action. On May 10, the airline took 76 of the pilots to court after the strike entered its eighth day. It has called on the courts to declare the strike illegal.

The airline is reported to be losing \$1 million a day and has been using other airlines and buses to transport its passengers. Zeevi Chairman Gad Zeevi said that the strike had caused "substantial damage both to the finances and the image of the company and the Bulgarian economy in general".

## **Air France strike over new 35-hour week legislation**

Cabin crew workers at the French national carrier Air France began a two-day strike on May 5 in a dispute over the implementation at the company of the new 35-hour week legislation. On the first day of the strike half of the airline's flights out of Paris were cancelled. These included both domestic flights and medium-haul flights to Europe from provincial cities.

Five unions called the strike, after rejecting a management proposal giving workers 12 extra days off per year and creating 377 jobs. The unions' proposal included more jobs and 15 extra days off.

## **Staff at the Louvre museum in Paris strike in support of restaurant workers**

Staff at the Louvre museum in Paris, France struck on May 4 for one day. The workers took the action to support restaurant workers involved in a wage dispute.

The strike only involved a small number of museum workers, but the picket lines prevented the majority of the 16,000 visitors who normally visit the museum daily from entering. Elio, the contracting company that runs the museum's restaurants, have reached an agreement with the restaurant workers following their three-week strike.

## **Strike forces shutdown of Nigerian textile factory**

The Angel Spinning Company in Kano, Nigeria—a textile company owned by Fadil Dayele from

Lebanon—was shut down by police after ill-treated workers threatened to burn it down. According to some of the workers who spoke on condition of anonymity, their complaint against company management is that they are made to work under inhuman conditions.

The workers have to alternate on two 12-hour shifts. They called on management to reduce their shifts to eight hours, in line with the requirements of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), but management refused. Frustrated, the workers asked for their salary for the number of days they had worked but their request was flatly turned down.

The workers then decided to go on strike and downed tools for several days. The company's general manager called for the help of a highly placed official in the state, who drafted mobile policemen to the premises.

An investigation of the company revealed that not only were employees over-worked, they are also entrapped by illegal regulations. In the whole of the 12 hours that constitute a shift, the workforce of over 4,000 is allowed only a 30-minute break. During this short break, the workers had to scramble single file through a single door to eat their food. In the struggle to meet deadlines, many often skip meals so as not to incur the wrath of their supervisors. If a worker returns late from break, he is barred from going into the factory and a large deduction made from his wages.

In order to maximise the manpower at their disposal, management refuse sick leave and no casual leave is given for workers with pressing personal business. Muslim workers on morning shift are not allowed to attend prayers.

The face-off between the management and employees of the company began when a new worker unknowingly opened a window in an area where a steam machine is used to dry finished textile materials. The worker was forced to do this due to the absence of air conditioning in the over-heated area. Nevertheless, he was dismissed. This angered the other workers, prompting the strike and eventual closure of the company.

When the police took up their post outside the company two weeks ago, they engaged the workers in open confrontation, leading to the shooting of three workers and one passer-by.

### **Strike hits synthetic fuel plant in South Africa**

A strike took place Monday at Sasol Synthetic Fuel at

Secunda in South Africa. Over 200 workers were said to have gathered for an illegal march. The strike was organised by members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), after recent retrenchments.



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