

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

1 June 2000

French train divers strike over working hours and staffing levels

French train drivers commenced industrial action over the last week. The strike began on May 27 in a dispute over working hours, the hiring of new staff and summer work rotas, disrupting rail services across the country, and also affecting trains between Paris and Basel, Switzerland. As well as local services around Paris, many regional lines were hit. These included services to and around Clermont Ferrand, Lyon, Marseilles, Bordeaux, Nantes, Dijon, Limoges and southern Alsace.

SNCF, the state railway company, said that its high-speed TGV trains would run normally. However the TGV service between Paris and the central town of Dijon was affected by the strike and traffic on the route was cut by a third.

Railway workers are demanding more staff be hired for the busy summer months. The dispute comes at a time when the rail service has seen increasing levels of freight and long-distance passenger traffic. In the first four months of 2000, both of these sectors grew by 10 percent. In another rail dispute, members of the drivers' union FGAAC are striking to demand increased train maintenance and more staff.

Norwegian unions call off planned strike action in public sector

On May 26, most of the public sector unions in Norway called off their planned strike action following contract negotiations with management.

The strike was due to include workers in the rail industry, hospital staff, childcare and nursery staff. It was not to include workers in the critical gas and oil industries.

The new agreement is effective for one year from May 1 and covers 600,000 public sector workers. The deal includes a pay rise of 4.8 percent or 5,000 krone (\$545) a year. The unions had initially called for an annual increase of 6-7,000 krone. There will also be an

extra two days holiday in 2001, rising to a week in 2002.

Several unions have rejected the deal and have stated that they will still take strike action. One of these has 1,000 members in child care, including 236 nursing assistants in Oslo who struck on May 29 after failing to reach an agreement with the local council over an annual pay increase and overtime rates. The strike hit the city's Aker Hospital and four districts including Hellerud, Bøler, Søndre Nordstrand and Ullern.

Pfizer workers strike unofficially in Ireland

Production workers at the Pfizer drug manufacturing plant in Ringaskiddy, County Cork took unofficial strike action on May 25. The 140 workers struck after they were asked to use new machinery without prior consultation. The workers are members of the SIPTU trade union.

The Ringaskiddy plant produces the main active ingredient for the impotence drug Viagra. The production of the drug was not affected by the dispute, as it is currently being manufactured elsewhere. The plant also manufactures other Pfizer products and antibiotics, including anti-fungal and anti-depression drugs.

Irish psychiatric nurses to take strike action

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Psychiatric nurses in Ireland voted to take strike action in a ballot announced on May 30. The nurses, members of the Psychiatric Nurses Association, voted by a margin of 84 percent in favour of action. The strike is due to take place at acute units nation-wide on June 6. The union claims the Health Service Employers Agency has reneged on an agreement to review pay rates for promoted grades. The two parties are to meet this week in an attempt to settle the dispute.

Police attack workers' demonstrations in Morocco

Police and anti-riot forces have viciously attacked two recent protests by workers in Morocco. In Rabat,

500 engineers affiliated to the UMT trade union staged a sit-in in front of the Finance Ministry, demanding that the government made changes to their job status. Police said that their action was illegal because it had not been authorised. The engineers' leaders argued that they had followed procedures and sent in notification of their protest three days in advance, which is what the law requires, but had received no official reply.

After the workers refused to disperse, police beat the protesters and chased them with batons. They continued the assault even when the engineers intermingled with onlookers, including employees from the nearby Ministry of Agriculture.

A second police attack occurred in the eastern city of Annaba. A march of 9,000 steel workers had been called, which was to begin in the industrial complex of El-Hadjar, a few miles from Annaba. Six thousand workers from Alfasid, a subsidiary of the giant steel corporation Sider, were joined by 3,000 workers employed in sister companies. They were protesting the refusal of Alfasid to pay wages for May and June this year. Alfasid is in financial difficulties and has been attempting to sell a 20 percent stake to the Italian firm Duferco in a bid to raise cash. This deal had not gone through, so the company decided not to pay wages.

The march was dispersed by a massive police deployment using rubber bullets and tear gas. Although no workers were killed, hundreds were wounded during the attack and several were hospitalised. The Moroccan Prime Minister is now meeting with union leaders over the future of the steel plant.



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