Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

15 June 2000

British railway workers consider strike action

Members of the National Union of Rail, Maritime & Transport Workers (RMT) rejected a pay offer on Thursday, June 8. The union says it is now considering strike action.

Railtrack—the private rail infrastructure group, which last year posted pre-tax profits of £360 million—had offered pay rises of just five percent to the signal workers. The RMT's 4,000 members rejected the offer in a ballot, but results of the vote for strike action will not be known until June 26.

Last week, Railtrack revealed it was seeking permission from the rail regulator for £750 million per year rise in total access charges it levies on train operators to help boost profits and meet “growth and network enhancement targets.” The company is currently facing a safety inquiry over the fatal train crash near west London's Paddington station last October, which killed 31 people.

Norwegian oil workers close oilfield

Oil workers struck on Saturday, June 10 after talks with employers about retirement conditions broke down. The Federation of Oil Workers' Trade Unions (OFS) and the Lederne union group called indefinite strikes by about 185 workers after employers rejected demands for a lower pension age of between 57 and 62.

Norway is amongst the world's top oil producing nations. The strike affected Shell's Draugen oilfield, which normally produces 225,000 barrels per day (bpd) out of Norway's 3.2 million bpd output. It will also stop work on the Heimdal natural gas platform, operated by Norsk Hydro, and the state oil firm Statoil's Aasgard B gas platform.

The unions insist that almost no offshore workers survive to reach normal pension age, which ranges between 62 and 67, because the work is so physically demanding. They also said they were willing to renounce any pay rises for 2000 in return for early retirement deals.

But Maiken Ims, spokeswoman for the employers' group—the Norwegian Oil Industry Association (OLF)—said the union demands were unreasonable. In the past the Norwegian state has resorted to emergency legislation whenever national oil output is threatened. The OFS reassured the government that it did not intend to widen the strike. “We will be cautious,” OFS deputy leader Bjoern Tjessem told Norway's main news agency.

Nigerian unions abandon general strike

The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) abandoned its nation-wide strike against a 50 percent increase in the prices of petroleum products on Monday, June 12. President Olusegun Obasanjo had said the government could not afford the $2 billion annual subsidy to keep fuel prices down, after the IMF had instructed the subsidy must be cut. The strike was ended after an agreement between the NLC and government representatives that petrol prices will be raised by 10 percent for now, although they are likely to increase further after negotiations.

The umbrella NLC began the strike last week after a number of spontaneous protests against the price hike, which increased the cost of gasoline from 76 cents to $1.15 a gallon. Rioting had brought the capital of Lagos to a standstill on June 8 after last-ditch talks failed to avert the strike. The action shut banks, offices and gas stations across Nigeria. Airlines also had to cancel flights and the capital's two sea ports were closed.

Also in Lagos, strike leaders commandeered buses at two major terminals to prevent them being used and attacked buses in the streets. Police arrested 19 people in the rioting, during which two people were killed. Protesting youths had barricaded roads and attacked commuter buses, halting traffic for several hours. Barricades similarly paralysed traffic in the southern cities of Abeokuta, Ibadan and Benin City.

Workers at the Oil Company Chevron had joined the strike on Friday. Chevron usually produces over

400,000 bpd of Nigeria's daily output of two million barrels of oil.

Zambian council workers suspended

About 2,000 striking Lusaka City Council (LCC) workers have been suspended, following a council ultimatum to call off their strike over non-payment of salaries. On June 8, the workers were given seven days notice to return to work before suspension or firing. Some 500 had gone back, but LCC spokesman Daniel M'soka said the workers who failed to respond to the ultimatum should now collect their suspension letters. Those who failed to do so should consider themselves fired, he continued. “We are very ready for any riotous behaviour, council police with the backing of Zambia police will make sure no meeting takes place,” M'soka said.

The strike, which started in Kafue and then Lusaka, spread to Chingola, Ndola, Luanshya and Kitwe. In Kitwe, council workers paralysed operations and cut off water supply to almost the entire city. They abandoned grave digging and garbage collection. In Ndola, unionised workers vowed not to resume work until they were paid their outstanding K40, 000 ($15) increase and arrears.

Tanzania—over 4,000 workers at Kilombero sugar factory on strike

About 4,000 workers at the Kilombero Sugar Company (KSC), now run by the ILLOVO group of South African investors, have gone on strike. The government-owned *Daily News* reported that following the strike the police was guarding KSC's two factories at Kilombero in the Morogoro region.

The police claim that striking workers burned three acres of sugar cane. The workers, on strike since June 5, are demanding the reinstatement of 61 colleagues who were laid off on May 31, without following existing labour laws on redeployment. In an effort to resolve the problem quietly, the trade union presented the case to the labour office. It is reported that KSC refused to give a statement and instead told the labour officer to take the issue to the Commissioner of Labour.