

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

11 January 2001

French security guards strike over safety issues

Security guards employed by the CIT (Cash In Transit) group in France are to hold a nationwide strike on January 11. The strike was called on January 9—the day of the funeral of Jean-Luc Hulot, a guard who was murdered at an ATM (Automatic Teller Machines) in a Paris hospital.

The strike has been called by the Transport Workers' Federation, which is part of the Force Ouvrière trade union. Hulot's murder on January 5 led to the outbreak of unofficial strike action by security workers at other companies. The staff returned to work shortly after but are refusing to service ATMs in "dangerous" locations at some shopping centres and stations.

Workers have warned that unless adequate measures are taken to guarantee their safety, then another strike could be held like the one last year that paralysed the entire French ATM network.

UK steelworkers may ballot for industrial action against job losses

Steelworkers employed by the UK-Dutch steel maker Corus may ballot for industrial action following reports that the company plans to close one of its plants and force compulsory redundancies at other sites this week.

It is rumoured the company plans the closure of its plant at Llanwern in South Wales, which employs 3,000 people. It has also been rumoured that workers at its Scunthorpe plant would be laid-off.

The job losses follow an announcement last month by Corus that a major restructuring of its UK operations is to take place, including the loss of 4,500 jobs across the country. The company said that no final decisions have been taken about plant closures in the UK or eventual job losses.

The Iron and Steel Trades Confederation union said that a mass meeting would be held on January 27 to decide on whether a strike ballot should be held over the threat of job losses. Steelworkers' unions are currently meeting with Corus after the company requested talks.

Teachers in London to strike over staff shortages

Secondary school in North London have voted to take industrial action over staff shortages. This week teachers at Christ Church school in Barnet voted by two to one not to cover for absent staff. The staff are members of the NASUWT trade union. The staff are to strike on January 16, after the union gave seven days notice of its intent.

There is currently a severe shortage of teachers in the London region. NASUWT general secretary Nigel de Gruchy said of the proposed strike, "London teaching services have been kept afloat by thousands of young supply teachers coming from Australia, New Zealand and latterly South Africa. But increasingly, they have been used to plug permanent gaps so no one now is available to cover for staff absences, sickness, in-service training release and other short term matters."

Irish bank workers to strike over jobs, pay and conditions

Employees at the Ulster Bank have voted to strike in a dispute over their jobs, pay and conditions. The 1,200 workers who took part in the ballot voted by more 81 percent in favour of industrial action. The ballot was organised by the Irish Bank Officials' Association (IBOA), which has 1,500 members at branches of the Ulster Bank.

Members of the union fear that the bank may be planning compulsory redundancies and cuts in pay as part of a restructuring programme. It has been reported that staff may be forced to reapply for regraded jobs on a lower rate of pay.

The bank—along with its parent bank, National Westminster—was taken over by the Royal Bank of Scotland last year, which announced that it would introduce a "change programme" designed to make the bank more competitive.

The union has stated that it will only strike if the redundancies are carried out and that it was more than happy to discuss restructuring. The cross-border bank has 117 branches in the Irish Republic and a further 94 in Northern Ireland. In the Republic 95 percent of staff have already come out in favour of strike action.

Malawi nurses call off national strike

A nation-wide strike of nurses that paralysed hospital services over the Christmas period was called off on January 3, when the Malawi government agreed to allocate houses to nurses and set up a task force to address their grievances.

The striking nurses were demanding a general improvement in working conditions and protesting against the government's decision to suspend allocation of houses to civil servants, except those on essential services like security forces and doctors.

Nurses Association President Georgina Chinula insisted that nurses provided an essential service. "Doctors and nurses work hand-in-hand. Without nurses doctors are handicapped," she said.

Government authorities claimed the strike was illegal. Nurses returned to work after receiving assurances from their National Association and government that no one is to be punished for the strike.

Striking Zambian Council Workers Stage Mock Funeral

Hundreds of striking local council workers staged a mock funeral in the northern Zambian copper mining town of Mufulira on January 8. They marched through the town, behind a council hearse and wearing mourning apparel, to demonstrate the fact that some of them are dying of hunger because they have not been paid since last May.

The hearse was plastered with posters denouncing the ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD), Zambian President Frederick Chiluba and District Administrator Paul Chaikatisha, whom they had earlier threatened to beat up when he tried to talk to them.

The demonstrators sang funeral songs and carried placards bearing slogans like "Fake term for Chiluba means another five years of hunger for council workers," and "MMD serial killer". They locked the council chamber and the administration block, bringing the entire council to a halt.

District Administrator Chaikatisha declared that he could not address the workers after they had displayed such "insulting posters" to both the ruling party and the president. He claimed to sympathise with the strikers for not being paid for so long, but appealed to them to go back to work while he talked to higher authorities to look into their plight.

The Mfulira council workers downed tools last Friday demanding to be paid their nine months salaries. They have vowed to stay on strike until they are paid all their salary arrears.

Agreement signed in South African security guard strike

An agreement has been brokered at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), in an attempt to end the two-week long national strike of South African security guards. The strike was over wages and working conditions, and at its height more than 100,000 workers were involved. It is only the second national security guard strike in South African history.

The new agreement reduces the working week from 55 to 50 hours a week without loss of pay and provides a minimum wage of R1,300 (\$168), up from the previous R1,243 (\$161). It also includes a number of fringe benefits. However there is no certainty that there will be a full return to work. The industry is split along racial lines and the white employers association, the South African Security Employers Association (Sansea), which represents approximately half the industry, has refused to sign the agreement. Their spokesman, Gavin Kirk, claims the settlement represents a 30 percent per annum wage increase and is not economically viable.

Thirteen different unions are involved in the security industry, which is one of the fastest growing sectors in South Africa. The South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (Satawu) is affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions. The other eight predominately black unions are independent. They are negotiating with four black employers' associations. The white unions, which are also unaffiliated, negotiate with Sansea.

The strike has been extremely bitter, especially because of the use of scab labour by Sansea. Satawu's general secretary, Randall Howard, has criticised Sansea for not wanting transformation and said, "We want to work with employers that want to transform the industry. The white employers are in a highly entrenched position of privilege."

Satawu is concerned about the number of smaller workers' organisations that are springing up, and has criticised the ease with which new unions can register themselves. They have called for a review of the process of becoming a union and the criteria needed. They blame the Department of Labour for the violence that occurred during the strike, because it had not prevented the mushrooming of allegedly "bogus unions".

Acting Director General Vuyi Raseroka at the Department of Labour said his department plans to investigate the allegations and will publish a "clarification order" by January 15.

Nigerian doctors take three-day strike action over unpaid salaries

Members of the Association of Resident Doctors employed at University College Hospital (UCH) Ibadan Nigeria, began a three-day strike last Friday. The "warning strike" was over the non-payment of their salaries.

A statement from the doctors, reported in the *Vanguard Daily* (Lagos) said: "An emergency general meeting of the Association of Resident Doctors, UCH, was held today (4-1-2001) to review the action of UCH management towards our withheld salaries, and other demands as confirmed in the letter conveying the suspension of the

NARD strike.

"The House expressed gross dissatisfaction with management's insensitivity towards our legitimate demands." It added that "consequently, the House unanimously decided to proceed on a 72-hour warning strike beginning at 8am, Friday, January 5, 2001."

Kenyan teachers' union calls off strike action

Teachers in the North Rift region yesterday protested the decision to call off a strike planned for January 5 over suspended teacher transfers and salary awards. They challenged the Kenya National Union of Teachers (Knut) headquarters to state where it stood on the transfers, saying they had not received letters revoking them.

Acting Secretary General of Knut, Francis Ng'ang'a said the union's National Executive Council had suspended the strike, called last month, "until further notice". He said the strike had been called off to facilitate negotiation with the government over the two issues. He did not state whether the teachers affected should work in their former stations pending the outcome of the negotiations.

Teachers from Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu, Keiyo and Nandi districts accused the union's National Executive Council of colluding with the Teachers Service Commission (TSC).

The Kenya education system is in a crisis, with a shortage of 11,872 teachers in 50 districts. The government has had a freeze on teacher recruitment since 1997 and is attempting to remedy the situation by compulsory transfers. Knut opposes this policy, insisting that the solution to staff shortages is to employ more teachers. The salary issue is over the non-implementation of an award, negotiated in November 1997. The Government claims that it cannot afford to pay the increase. The teachers are angry and challenge the union about the reasons for entering new talks with the government. They see the negotiations as delaying tactics that are meant to "blackmail" teachers. Most of those subject to the transfers insist they will not report to their new stations "until the matter is clarified".

Leader of the Safina Party, Farah Maalim says the mass transfer should go as planned. He insists that teachers who defy the directive should be retired and replaced with unemployed graduates.



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