

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

22 February 2001

## **Rail conductors in England threaten strike ballot to demand improved safety at work**

Train conductors employed by the Connex rail operator in England have threatened a strike ballot next month in a dispute over safety at work.

The staff, who work on the Connex Coastway West are calling for an immediate increase in security following a spate of violent attacks on them by passengers. Representatives of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union held a meeting in London with management and said that without new security measures being implemented, a strike ballot would be held on March 6. One of the proposals for industrial action involves conductors refusing to work on Connex trains after 9pm.

## **Union calls off Aer Lingus cabin crew strikes in Ireland**

The IMPACT trade union, representing striking Irish Aer Lingus airline cabin crew, has called off three strikes planned during the last week.

The cabin crews are holding a series of 24 hours strikes against the airline in a dispute over pay. The two strikes this week were due to be held on February 21 and 23.

The union also called off a strike planned for February 16 due to new proposals made by the Irish Labour Court regarding a resolution to the dispute. It is now understood that a formula for an agreement may have been reached in subsequent talks between the union, airline management and the Court. Previous strikes by the cabin crews had resulted in the grounding of the entire Aer Lingus fleet.

It is expected that the Court will ask IMPACT to put the new deal to a ballot of its 1,400 members. The staff have previously rejected Labour Court proposals to end the dispute by a margin of 98 percent.

## **Belarus demonstration calls for wage rises**

A demonstration of 9,000 workers took place in Minsk, Belarus, on February 14 under the slogan,

“Raise wages up to the level of prices!”

More than 2,000 of the demonstrators, who assembled in Bangor Square in Minsk, were members of the Belarus Automobile and Agricultural Machinery Workers' Union (AAM).

An average monthly wage for workers at automobile and agricultural machinery companies last year was 83,245 roubles (\$US83).

## **Hungarian journalists strike over non-payment of wages**

Fifteen Hungarian regional journalists went on strike on February 14, and 40 others announced a sit-in at a state television station because they had not been paid in months.

The 15 journalists from the regional station in southwestern Pecs stopped working after they “received no guarantee whatsoever that we would be paid for five months of work,” spokesman Karoly Nemeth said. “We shall not lend more to state TV,” he added.

In the southeastern Szeged regional station, reporters announced they would not leave their offices for 48 hours from Wednesday in a symbolic gesture to draw attention to their plight. “We have not been paid since September, and the latest deadline expired at noon Wednesday,” said a spokesman. “But we shall continue to do our work, because the viewers cannot be let down.”

Hungarian Television (MTV) wanted to raise cash for the salaries by selling property in the capital, Budapest, but its supervisory body refused to approve the deal. However, on February 19 the board of trustees of Hungarian Television Public Foundation decided to sell the public service TV's property in Bojtar Street, Budapest, to APV Rt (State Privatisation and Assets Management Joint-Stock Company). MTV's external staff, who have not received payment for several months, or even for years, will now be paid.

Television staff and journalists expressing solidarity

with their colleagues gathered for a silent demonstration outside MTV headquarters on February 20. Several hundred members of the public also joined the protest.

Attila Kozo, editor and program-maker of MTV's Szeged studio, told the crowd, "Everybody should recognize that there is no press freedom where journalists are being kept in fear for their existence. Where there is no press freedom, democracy is in danger."

### **Fiat Poland to lay off 750 workers**

On February 6, Fiat announced its decision to dismiss 750 workers at its plant in Bielsko Biala, Poland. The auto company took the decision without consultation with Solidarnosc, the trade union that represents the workforce.

A protest campaign has been launched and Fiat workers have posted banners on all factory gates in Bielsko Biala, as well as in Tyche, demanding that management withdraw its plans.

Solidarnosc has not planned any action to oppose the closure, other than an appeal for letters of protest to be sent to Fiat headquarters in Turin, Italy, and to Bielsko Biala. The union leaders are only asking that the company consult with them over the redundancies in order to safeguard their own privileged existence as an arm of management. General Secretary of the International Metalworkers' Federation, Marcello Malentacchi, pleaded with the company in a letter he sent to Fiat president, Paolo Cantarella. "To pursue dismissals in such a manner is unacceptable in this day and age," he said. "I ask you to rescind the announcement and immediately begin negotiations in good faith with our affiliate."

### **Postal workers strike in South Africa**

Seven thousand postal workers began a strike on Monday in the Gauteng and Western Cape regions of South Africa, over payment disputes and changes to their conditions of employment. Communication Workers' Union (CWU) spokesman Sizwe Matshikiza said that other provinces would join the industrial action as soon as they had followed the required procedures to ensure a strike was legal. In Gauteng, 4,000 workers are expected to strike, while 3,000 are expected to stay away from work in Western Cape. Matshikiza said the strike action would intensify until Post Office management "starts to listen" to workers'

demands.

Management claims that the workers' demands were opposed to the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, which stipulates that overtime payments should be one and a half times the normal rate for working more than a 42 hour week. Their spokesman claimed that in the past workers had sometimes received more than this, but that "the Post Office, with its financial loss for this financial year, cannot tolerate these irregularities."

CWU members in the Free State region also accuse the Post Office management of racism, claiming that various privileges were awarded on racial lines.

### **Suspended Kenyan workers protest**

Suspended Heritage Woollen Mills employees have protested management's requirement that they apply afresh for their jobs when the firm is revived. At a meeting outside the company premises at the weekend, more than 2,000 employees suspended when the company closed protested their dismissal without notice.

Executive Director Sunil Misra, said the company had closed as a result of lack of raw materials and that the workers' appointments had been terminated. Misra said the employees would be considered for reemployment under new terms if the firm is revived in three months time.

The angry workers accused the management and their union, the Kenya Tailoring and Textile Workers Union, of neglecting their interests in a redundancy agreement. They said they wanted the company to reemploy them automatically if business is revived, and that the Sh6,000 (US\$77) severance they are to be given was too little.



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