

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

8 March 2001

## **UK passport workers ballot for strike action**

Passport workers across the UK are to vote on whether to strike following their rejection of a new pay offer. Staff employed by the Passport Agency recently voted by 874 to 87 to reject a pay rise of 5.6 percent.

The Public and Commercial Services Union said the pay offer had too many strings attached to it. The union is demanding a pay increase of seven percent, but said that it would continue to negotiate with the company to avoid strike action. Negotiator Frank Campbell said, "We want to avoid strike action if possible but our members are very determined that they should be treated fairly".

Balloting is to start on March 8 and will end on March 21.

## **British Midland airline ground staff vote to end strike**

On March 5, British Midland airline ground staff based in Dublin, Ireland voted to end a month-long strike and return to work.

The workers, members of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union, struck in February to protest the airline's decision to sell off the airport's ground handling services to Gatwick Haulage International Ltd. They rejected the compensation terms as unsatisfactory and have picketed the entrance to Dublin Airport since the strike began.

The dispute ended when the staff voted almost unanimously to accept a recommendation of the Irish Labour Court to end the dispute. The Labour Court offered an improved compensation deal and called for an independent facilitator to be appointed to resolve outstanding issues such as pensions and concessionary travel. The vote was 118 to one in favour of an acceptance of the recommendation. It was announced just hours after several hundred Aer Lingus and Aer Rianta airline workers joined the British Midland staff

on a lunchtime demonstration to support the strike.

## **Israeli airport workers begin indefinite strike**

Airport Authority workers in Israel began an indefinite strike on March 6. The strike has closed all airports in the country, including the Ben-Gurion international airport. The airport staff are calling on management to honour an agreement to give tenure to a number of temporary workers.

The industrial action began with a shutdown of the domestic airports, but when management refused to meet with the union, it extended the strike to Ben-Gurion. So far, it has disrupted at least 30 flights and affected around 3,000 passengers. The airport workers union said that planes were being allowed to land, but not to take off and that arriving passengers were not receiving their luggage as it was not being unloaded.

The company says it needed to cutback on staff because of a drastic drop in tourism during the second half of last year as a result of the Palestinian uprising on the West Bank and Gaza. Airport Authority spokesman Pini Schiff said that the authority would consider tenure for the temporary staff, but that it would not add workers to the permanent workforce at this point. He said that the union had already agreed to work with management in reducing the workforce and reducing salary costs and that management had consulted with union representatives before every layoff.

## **South African post office strikes continue**

Postal workers in South Africa came out on strike for the second time last week, opposing changes to their terms and conditions of employment as the service is prepared for privatisation. About 14,000 members of the Communications Workers Union (CWU) are now out on strike.

The CWU action comes within days of a strike by 9,000 members of the Post and Telkom Association

(PTA), the other union within the Post Office, being called off. These are the first postal strikes in South Africa for 99 years. The CWU, was supposed to take part in the strike alongside the PTA from the first strike day, but changed its position in favour of negotiations with management, which then subsequently broke down.

Post office spokesman Ben Rootman said 70 post offices had been closed as a result of the CWU strike. CWU Gauteng deputy chairperson Charles John said, "The strike is about the unilateral withdrawal of conditions of employment, which is double payment for Sunday shifts."

Police clashed with the striking workers at Witspos, the Johannesburg post office sorting centre, after they prevented cars belonging to employees on duty from leaving the premises. The strikers refused to back down.

At the mail centre at Johannesburg International Airport, striking workers were tear-gassed, arrested and later released. In Pretoria, striking workers converged on the Pretoria police station to lay a charge against a security guard, after a shot was fired at workers outside the Tshwane mail centre on the morning of Monday March 5. 25 workers appeared in the Kimberley Magistrate's Court on charges of intimidation. The workers were arrested on Friday March 2, after blocking an entrance to the Kimberley post office and trapping an area manager inside the building.

The post office has now been granted an "urgent court interdict" preventing striking workers from carrying out any effective picketing. Management said it had instituted a national lockout and has started using scab labour to ensure mail was delivered.

CWU national coordinator Mark Vika said the strikes were also in response to the post office decision in September last year to phase out the housing subsidy over a three year period and to withdraw as the depositor of the worker's pension fund and medical aid contributions. He said it was clear that the post office had no intention to negotiate on these issues and was clearly following the example of the telecommunications company, Telkom, who, through their partnership with foreign investors, retrenched thousands of workers.

### **Côte d'Ivoire: Staff Strike grounds Air Afrique**

A one-day strike by Air Afrique workers against

2,000 lay-offs, which started at midnight on Tuesday last week, was effective in Abidjan, capital of Côte d'Ivoire. This was despite the deployment of security forces around the company's headquarters located at Abidjan airport. "Nobody has the heart to work at Air Afrique because of frustrations experienced by our laid-off comrades," a worker at the company said. "Worse still, we have not yet been paid our January and February salaries." Air Afrique's current debt is estimated at more than \$200m and its fleet—serving 20 destinations as the only connection between many West African capitals—has been reduced to eight aircraft.

In neighbouring Mali, about 100 Air Afrique employees, led by leaders of Mali's main labour union UNTM, marched peacefully in protest to the office of the prime minister. They carried banners calling for the departure of the new Air Afrique director Jeffrey Erikson—the man picked by the World Bank to revamp the airline. Despite an official permit for their march, the workers were confronted by two truckloads of police in full riot gear, who blocked their entry to the prime minister's office.

Erikson has been given nine weeks by the World Bank in which to turn the company around. He maintains that the dismissal of 2,000 workers will enable the company "to breathe" and warned the employees that any strike could bring on bankruptcy.

### **Ethiopia: Strike spreads at Midroc Construction**

A strike by employees of Midroc Construction working at the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) building in Addis Ababa has now been joined by Midroc workers at other sites. The action has brought 90 percent of the company's projects to a standstill. Management is accusing the leaders of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions of going organising an unofficial strike.



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