

# Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

15 March 2001

## **Polish steelworkers stage hunger strike**

Eight steelworkers began a hunger strike on March 8 at the Katowice Steelworks in southern Poland. The sit-in was started by six workers (joined a day later by another two) in protest against a decision by the banks to withdraw credit for the indebted steel plant.

Steelworkers' protests began a month ago, when more than 2,000 people demonstrated in Katowice demanding talks with the government. The Katowice plant is Poland's largest producer of steel, with an annual capacity of 5 million tons.

Stanislaw Szrek, from the steelworks' Solidarity union, said a strikers' delegation is to meet a government team for talks on Friday, but no concrete results were expected. "I don't think the talks will bring anything. It will just be another formal meeting," Szrek said.

## **Irish secondary school teachers take national strike action**

Secondary school teachers in Ireland are set to begin a nationwide strike on March 14, following the rejection of a new pay offer by their union. The Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland executive voted to reject a new offer from the government last week. The union represents 16,000 secondary school teachers.

The proposed industrial action is the latest in an ongoing dispute that began last year when the teachers went on strike in pursuit of a 30 percent pay claim. Further rolling regional strikes were suspended at the end of January this year, when the state's Labour Court intervened and attempted to resolve the dispute. Following the nationwide strike, five more walkouts are planned over the next three weeks. The action is expected to have an impact on the upcoming leaving and junior certificate oral exams.

## **Irish health workers to ballot on strike action**

Health workers employed by the Eastern Regional Health Authority (ERHA) in Ireland are to ballot for strike action in a dispute over pay. The 4,000 staff, who are members of the SIPTU trade union, are to ballot over the non-payment of salaries and an overdue pay award.

Paul Bell, secretary of SIPTU's Dublin Health Services Branch, said, "To make matters worse, the ERHA has failed to pay increases due under the PPF in due time. The present difficulties have been exacerbated by the Authority's failure to pass on a special pay award which has already been paid to similar grades in all the Voluntary and Private Hospitals."

## **London Underground staff vote to strike in jobs and**

## **safety dispute**

London Underground rail staff are to strike for one day on March 29 in an ongoing dispute over jobs and safety. On March 9 it was announced that the staff, members of the Rail Maritime and Transport Union (RMT), had voted by 11 to one in favour of industrial action. The strike will involve 7,500 RMT members employed on the "Tube".

The dispute has arisen amid workers fears that the introduction of the government's public-private partnership (PPP) on the Underground will lead to a decline in job security and the safety of subway services in London. RMT Assistant General Secretary Bob Crow said, "This dispute is not about jobs for life, it is about saving lives. We are trying to avoid a repeat of the catastrophe on the former British Rail when thousands of experienced safety-conscious rail workers were axed."

The union was involved in last minute talks with management on March 8 in an attempt to head off strike action, but the parties were unable to reach agreement.

The train drivers' union Aslef has announced that its members will also support the strike, which could bring the entire Underground to a standstill on March 29.

Steve Grant, district secretary of Aslef, said, "Our drivers are telling us that the intensive service levels and narrow margin for error on the Underground means any break-down in safety will have horrific consequences. Our members are prepared to lose a further day's pay to put safety first because neither they nor the public can afford a Hatfield [recent fatal crash on the rail network] on the Tube."

## **Abidjan port paralysed by dock strike**

Thousands of dockworkers in the Port of Abidjan, capital of Côte d'Ivoire, have brought the docks to a halt with a week-long strike starting Thursday last week. The strike was triggered by alleged irregular payment of allowances by the Union of Handling Companies of the Port of Abidjan and San-Pedro.

The dockworkers are protesting against underpayment by the handling companies, and are demanding immediate implementation of the basic rate, the implementation of procedures for calculating retirement benefits, and the rehabilitation and reintegration of their suspended colleagues. Starting pay for dock workers is only about 280 CFA francs (\$0.40) an hour. After a 72-hour strike failed to bring the desired result in February, the workers are said to be

considering an indefinite action.

Union leader Moussa Fofana said at least 50 strikers were taken into custody when the strike started. No reasons for the arrests have been given, and the police failed to issue any comment. Fofana said the strikers had been "checking to see that dock workers were not working" when they were seized.

The port is one of Africa's busiest. Côte d'Ivoire accounts for about 40 percent of the world's cocoa supply and is also Africa's largest coffee producer. Abidjan's political and economic problems have sharply reduced business at the port. Exporters say the strike has not greatly affected the market, since the peak time for exports has already passed. Côte d'Ivoire's status as a stable economic centre for West Africa has been shattered by the Christmas Eve 1999 coup and subsequent political instability. The country's economy has been badly hurt in recent years by falling cocoa and coffee prices.

The dockworkers' strike coincides with an unlimited strike action by palm oil planters at the giant Ehania agro-industrial unit, 150 km east of Abidjan. The strike is to press for an increase in the price of palm oil. The Ehania planters, grouped in an agricultural cooperative called "Palm-Ehania," are protesting against a drop in the purchase price of their produce since January 2001. The strikers plan to extend their action to other palm oil factories throughout the country.

The strike action is already causing the industry a loss of 360 million CFA francs (\$502,000) per day, having brought three palm oil factories to a halt. The Ehania agro-industrial unit turns out 160,000 tons of oil per annum—about a quarter of the national production.

#### **Labour Court rules against South African Volkswagen workers**

The Labour Court in South Africa has overturned a previous ruling by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) that the 1,300 sacked Volkswagen SA (VWSA) workers should be reinstated. Moreover, it has declared that the workers should pay the costs associated with the review proceedings.

The CCMA had ruled earlier that the workers, sacked from the VWSA plant in Uitenhage in February last year, should return to work on February 5 this year. However, VWSA obtained a Labour Court order preventing the workers from returning to their jobs. Last week, the Labour Court overturned the initial ruling by the CCMA.

The workers at VW's Uitenhage auto plant were sacked for taking part in a strike declared illegal by the courts. Their dismissal followed two weeks of struggle at the plant during which the leaders of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) openly sided with management. The workers had downed tools 20 in protest against Numsa's decision to suspend 13 shop stewards. The stewards were accused of bringing the union into "serious disrepute", although no evidence against them has been produced to back up these claims.

Having sacked 1,300 workers, VWSA then began recruiting replacements. The sacked workers left Numsa and joined the Oil, Chemical, General and Allied Workers' Union (Ocgawu), which has taken their case through a number of legal proceedings. Ocgawu is now preparing for yet another legal battle—this time at the Constitutional Court—claiming this is the best way to get their members' jobs back. "If need be, we will be taking the case to the Constitutional Court and ultimately to the International Labour Organisation (ILO)," said Siphwo Douse, the secretary of the Uitenhage Ocgawu local.

Douse said workers were "suffering hardships because of the dismissal". Some had been evicted from their homes and had their property confiscated. He said, last week a worker had committed suicide because he could not "take the pressure any more".

Numsa said the ruling was "regrettable and unfortunate," and that it had "opened its doors for dismissed workers." But neglected to say that it was the union's own actions that had led to them being sacked in the first place. Accepting the court's decision, Numsa announced, "We want to make sure that these workers have jobs. The union will endeavour with others to find other forms of gainful employment in the form of cooperatives, and negotiate a social plan to ensure that we alleviate poverty and unemployment in Uitenhage."

#### **South African Post strikers attacked by police**

A strike by postal workers in South Africa is continuing from last week. The authorities are doing everything they can to break the resolve of the strikers. A demonstration in Johannesburg on March 6 came under attack by police, after being declared illegal. Police firing rubber bullets and teargas dispersed the demonstrators, who gathered on the corner of Jeppe and Kruis streets.

Dion Wilson, a striker at the Johannesburg international mail centre, said, "We were just trying to ask the scab workers to join and support us when the police showed up here, took out their guns and started firing rubber bullets and teargas at us."

The Labour Court has granted the Post Office an injunction restraining strikers from "assaulting, intimidating or threatening non-strikers", blocking access to the mail centres or damaging property. This was despite the action by the 14,000 striking workers being mainly peaceful, with few clashes reported. The strike has, however, severely affected mail deliveries.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) and management have been holding behind-the-scenes meetings, but have refused to comment on the state of negotiations.



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