

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

10 May 2001

Railway staff stage 24-hour strike in long running dispute

On May 31, staff employed by South West Trains (SWT) across London and southern England staged a 24-hour strike. The strike was the culmination of an ongoing dispute over a number of issues. The Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) called the action, blaming SWT for a total breakdown in industrial relations. Staff objections to wearing bright red waistcoats triggered the latest action; with workers saying the uniform has made them targets for hostility and abuse.

The strike led to the cancellation of hundreds of trains and affected more than 300,000 passengers, many of whom use South West Trains to travel into London to work.

It is understood that the company and the RMT were able to reach a settlement through the conciliation service ACAS prior to the strike, but it still went ahead. A South West Trains spokeswoman said: "The RMT's own negotiators agreed that the settlement before them was an acceptable resolution of the issue but the union's executive has decided to ignore the recommendation and go ahead with the strike".

Family doctors in Holland strike over lack of government funds

Family doctors in Holland began a three-day strike on May 2. It is estimated that 90 percent of the country's 7,000 family doctors took part in the dispute over the regulated fee they can charge for their services. Doctors are calling on the government to increase the amount that is paid to them from social insurance funds. As much as 70 percent of doctors' incomes is paid out of government-run insurance funds.

Fulco Seegers, a spokesman of the National Family Doctors Union, stated, "Patients are now experiencing how it is to live without family doctors. If the government declines to spend more money, the profession will disappear within five to 10 years."

As a result of the strike many hospitals were overcrowded with patients. Marcel Licher, a spokesman

for the VU Medical Centre in Amsterdam said, "We've 91 patients in the emergency room so far. One-third were typical family doctor matters".

Norwegian electricity workers to strike over proposed outsourcing of jobs in the industry

Electricity workers in Norway are to strike on May 11 in opposition to proposed government legal changes they fear will lead to the outsourcing of jobs in the industry.

The electricity industry is currently largely under state and municipal control. More than 4,500 electricity workers across the country are to hold a two-hour protest strike on May 11. The power workers' union EL & IT called the action.

The EL & IT has stated that the outsourcing legislation being proposed would mean that work safety as well as the security of supply of electricity would be affected. The union also says that jobs and employment conditions would be severely affected by such changes. The government has so far refused to withdraw the legislation.

Furniture workers in Ireland strike to demand pay increase

Furniture workers in Ireland struck last week to demand a pay rise. The workers, who are members of the Building and Allied Trades Union (BATU), have been seeking an increase in basic craft rates from £240 a week at present to £379. The latter rate has been agreed nationally with the union and the National Furniture Manufacturers Association as a basic wage for building craft workers since last October.

The Labour Court has rejected the proposed pay claim of the furniture workers. Many of the staff involved work for small furniture and woodturning plants in the border counties.

Irish train drivers begin strikes over union recognition

On May 1, members of the Irish Locomotive Drivers' Association (ILDA) began a series of one-day strikes in a dispute to demand official recognition for their union. Last year, the union staged a series of strikes over 10 weeks over this issue, but it is still not officially

recognised in the industry.

In January, the Irish Supreme Court ruled that the ILDA had no automatic right to represent train drivers and Iarnrod Eireann (The Irish Rail Network) management did not have to grant any negotiating status to them. The two recognised drivers' unions are SIPTU and the National Bus and Rail Union. The ILDA represents 110 train drivers, while SIPTU and the NBRU represent a further 240. Two months ago, the ILDA affiliated to the ATGWU union, which has 80 members among Iarnrod Eireann's 5,000 staff.

The industrial action will affect Connolly and Fairview stations in Dublin, as well as Drogheda and Dundalk. A further strike is planned and this would include workers based at Cork, Mallow, Waterford, Inchicore, Limerick, Athlone and Portlaoise. Strikes were also planned at depots in Sligo, Ballina, Westport and Mullingar.

Zimbabwe car workers lock in management

Hundreds of workers at Willowvale Mazda Motor Industries (WMMI) locked in the company management at their Harare premises on Wednesday last week. They were demanding clarification of their future, after management failed to re-open the plant as had been promised.

The 300-plus workers were sent home last December, when WMMI said it was temporarily closing the plant until this month. When the workers were told that it was not re-opening yesterday, they barred the managers from leaving the firm's premises.

The workers accused management of keeping them guessing about their future with the troubled car assembly plant, which has only functioned sporadically over the past two years. "When the company closed, we were told to report for work on May 2, which is today, but management are telling us to go away again and probably try next month," one worker said.

"We cannot just go away without knowing whether or not the company will be opening again, and whether we will be paid during this period," he told the press, speaking on condition of anonymity. Most of the workers were still blocking the main gate later that day, while a few of their representatives were said to be locked in a meeting with management. Private security officers said they had been instructed to deny access to the reporters.

The workers, who have been on half pay since mid-1999, said they were now "sick and tired" of living an uncertain life and were demanding that the company start working on "decent retrenchment packages" for them. "We are saying if the firm is not opening now, as it

promised in December, then let it pay us retrenchment packages and we will go. It will re-hire us when it needs our services," another worker said.

No settlement for Coca-Cola strikers in South Africa

The strike at the Coca-Cola depot in Wilsonia, East London, is in its fourth week, without any end in sight. The strike started after workers of the Food and Allied Workers' Union (Fawu) demanded their provident fund be transferred from the Kilimanjaro Bottling Provident Fund to the Fawu Industrial Provident Fund. According to Fawu official and shop steward Eric Thathi, the management refused, saying it would transfer the fund somewhere else. Thathi said no meetings had been held between management and the union since the strike began. Striking workers have been picketing outside the locked gates of the company, which has employed contract workers to replace the strikers.

South African local government workers protest low wages

About 5,000 members of the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) were gathered outside the SABC Park offices in Pietersburg, Northern Province, May 7 to demonstrate for a higher wage increase. Samwu spokesman Sonny Mabitsela said the crowd would wait for other workers to arrive before they departed for the offices of their employers, the South African Local Government Association (Salga), where they would hand over a memorandum. The one-day protest comes after Salga and Samwu failed to resolve a deadlock in salary negotiations. Samwu will hold demonstrations in other South African provinces this month as part of their pay campaign.

The union initially demanded a 15 percent increase but then backed down to 10 percent. Salga is offering just 5 percent, less than the current inflation rate of 7.7 percent. Mabitsela said another round of talks with management was scheduled in Durban on May 11.



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