

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

17 May 2001

UK retailer Marks & Spencer faces staff protests

Thousands of European workers are to gather in London for a mass protest against plans by UK retailer Marks & Spencer to close its stores on the Continent. Workers from France, Belgium and Spain will be joined by their colleagues from Britain at a march and rally today, which will pass in front of the company's head office.

There is anger at the closure of stores, with the loss of thousands of jobs, and workers have attacked the lack of consultation—staff were only informed about the French shutdowns at about the same time as the London Stock Exchange. Marks & Spencer announced in March that it was to close all its European branches to put the group on a more profitable footing. The means the loss of more than 4,000 jobs, 1,700 of them in 18 stores in France.

Disneyland Paris staff strike

Security workers at Disneyland Paris have staged a strike to demand help to stop attacks on staff dressed as famous Disney characters. Marie-Line Lesueur, a union representative at the theme park, told the *Daily Express*, "Teenage boys are the main offenders. They hit out at the performers and try to steal their uniforms. Very often they succeed. Mickey Mouse's ears were torn off the other day; luckily they were not the performer's own ears and Donald Duck lost his beak. Minnie Mouse's dress was ripped off too. The young hoodlums treat these items as trophies."

French unions may strike over introduction of euro

French bank workers and security van drivers threatened the Jospin government last week with strikes and protests over its failure to consult them on the introduction of euro notes and coins.

The CFTD union said dissatisfaction among security van drivers about overwork and the increased risk of attack by criminals "could lead to an explosion of industrial unrest which would severely damage the introduction of the euro".

According to the French Banking Federation, bank robberies have been increasing and there are about five bank-related hold-ups a day in France. Security van drivers have already staged a series of strikes and protests, demanding better protection against sometimes fatal attacks, in which

robbers have used automatic weapons, and, in one case, a bazooka.

German defence proposals provoke strikes

Civilian workers at German military bases have gone on strike against the threat of a possible 120,000 job losses due to reforms in the defence department. Thousands of workers walked off the job to press demands for legal guarantees against layoffs.

The "warning strikes" lasting only a few hours preceded new contract negotiations set for May 16. Workers are to step up strikes if the government refuses to address their demands.

Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping has proposed that many civilian tasks to be contracted out to private companies. The union wants assurances that pay scales will be maintained and that civilians forced to retire early under the reform suffer no cuts in government pensions.

The reform plans have prompted the US to complain that Germany should do more for NATO readiness, while there have been local protests against planned base closures. Under reforms approved by parliament last year, Germany's military is to be cut from the current level of 338,000 to about 280,000 by 2004. The balance will be shifted toward professional soldiers. The reform is designed to save 1.6 billion marks (\$700 million) a year by 2003 over current budget levels.

Israeli government declares war on foreign workers

The Israeli Labour and Social Affairs Minister Shlomo Benizri yesterday announced that his number one priority was to rid the country of an estimated 150,000 foreign workers.

Benizri told the Ministerial Committee on Foreign Workers, which he heads, that he wants the police to arrest and deport at least 1,000 illegal workers a month. He also plans a huge rise in the fines on employers of foreign workers without permits, and wants the establishment of an Immigration Service. The minister declared, "I'm not afraid of the bleeding hearts, I'll fight the war against them. I'm the minister of labor and social affairs, not some neighbourhood manager. I plan to make order. There is a real danger to the

image of our society." The police have already begun implementing the new policy laid down by Benizri. They started in Eilat yesterday, raiding hotels where many of the foreigner workers are employed, arresting 36.

Israeli munitions workers to wage struggle against job losses

The state-owned Israel Military Industries plans to lay off 100 employees in the near future, including 80 workers in its ammunition group. Thirty of the layoffs are the result of a merger of two chemical plants.

The chairman of the IMI workers' committee, Moshe Even Shua, has asked the *Histadrut* (Israel's union body) for help in mounting a struggle against the planned layoffs. After declaration of a strike, a 15-day "cooling off" period is mandated by law. After this, the workers would be entitled to strike or organise other sanctions. IMI workers met on Sunday to plan their strategy.

Even Shua said a dispute would be declared not only due to the planned layoffs, but also because management has failed to sign a new collective bargaining agreement following the expiration of the previous one in December. "The management is trying to establish facts on the ground by firing workers before entering into negotiations with us. We won't allow this," he said.

IMI recorded losses of \$31.3 million in 2000. During the past three months, the company has experienced a shortage of cash that has made it difficult for it to pay suppliers. The government has appointed a task force headed by Finance Minister Director-general Avi Ben-Bassat and his Defense Ministry counterpart, Amos Yaron, to work out a plan to bail out the struggling company.

Malawian water workers sacked for going on strike

There were running battles in the Malawi capital Lilongwe last Friday, as armed police officers in riot gear chased striking workers out of the premises of the Lilongwe Water Board. The strike began on Thursday May 10 after talks with management to improve working conditions and for a 100 percent pay rise broke down. Strikers accused Water Board bosses, who are mostly President Bakili Muluzi's political appointees, of plundering company resources by buying themselves expensive vehicles and giving themselves hefty perks while workers get low wages.

One of the workers told journalists: "We have removed our union leaders because for over a year they have not brought us any results. We are demanding 100 percent and nothing short of that".

When the talks broke down the angry workers barricaded senior management in their offices, deflated their car tyres and disconnected water to the city.

When the city ran short of water, general manager Frank Msicha telephoned the police who responded with brutal

force. Later a truckload of armed police dragged the workers at gunpoint to reconnect water to the hospitals and the city's business district. Police spokesman Oliver Soko said whoever was caught disconnecting water—or preventing other workers from reconnecting the water—would be arrested and charged with sabotage.

The board has sacked all the 350 strikers and told them to reapply for their jobs, making it clear that all militants will be refused. Msicha told the media that the management now wants to get rid of "undesirable elements", accusing the workers of being unruly and refusing to hold dialogue with their "superiors" during the strike. He said those who want their jobs back have been given up to Monday next week to reapply.

Zambian City Council workers strike to get back-pay

City Council workers in Lusaka, the Zambian capital, went on strike on May 11 to demand payment of their two months salary arrears—council workers in the capital have not been paid for March and April. The strikers gathered outside the Civic Centre building Friday vowing not to resume duties until they were paid.

Most of the councils in the country have been experiencing financial difficulties, with some workers going without their salaries for months.

Nigerian fertiliser workers strike to protest non-payment of wages

Workers at the National Fertiliser Company of Nigeria (NAFCON) plant in Onne, Rivers State, have halted the company's operations over non-payment of their salary. The entire workforce of over 1,000 walked off the job last week and resolved not to return until their salaries and rent subsidies—totalling millions of naira— were paid.

At 7 a.m. on Wednesday last week, union officials—including the senior staff association—led the entire staff and stationed themselves at the company's main gate. Union officials accused the management team of insensitivity, saying that the union had made a series of attempts to hold a dialogue with them on the issue, but this was fruitless. They said the ammonia plant could commence production within eight weeks if their demands were met, but if not, "Nigerians should not expect fertilisers before this year runs out." The union officials said that the Federal Government paid about N1.05 billion to the company this year, but management used none of this to fund unpaid salaries.



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