

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

31 May 2001

Airline staff in France hold 48-hour strike against staff redundancies

French airline workers employed by AOM/Air Liberté began a two-day strike on May 24 in opposition to proposed cuts in staffing levels. The action came at the start of the long holiday weekend and led to the cancellation of medium and long haul flights.

Airline unions called the strike following AOM-Air Liberté proposals to shed 1,300 jobs as part of a restructuring plan. The job losses will reduce the AOM-Air Liberté work force of 6,000 people by more than 20 percent.

All long-distance flights from Orly airport in Paris to Reunion and other overseas French territories were halted. The airlines were able to run some flights from Orly to cities such as Metz, Annecy, Rodez and La Rochelle. AOM and Air Liberté, which merged last year to form a single company, recently announced a net loss of 2.4 billion francs (\$321 million) for the year 2000.

Sorting office workers in Britain return to work after unofficial strike

On May 24, sorting office workers in Watford, England voted to end their recent wildcat strike by accepting a number of assurances in their dispute over changes to working patterns. The strike by members of the Communication Workers Union was supported by thousands of other sorting office workers.

CWU spokesman David Baulch welcomed the end of the strike saying, "We certainly hope there will be no more strikes in Watford." Baulch also said that it would take "a couple of weeks" for the backlog of mail to be cleared.

Rail guards in Britain balloted for industrial action in job description dispute

The Rail Maritime and Transport union is balloting its members in a long-running dispute over the role of guards on trains. The guards are employed by 24 of the private rail companies and the ballot is for a series of

24-hour strikes. The result is to be announced next month.

Two train companies, Thameslink and West Anglia Great Northern, are not involved in the dispute as their trains operate without guards.

The union recently published an opinion poll that found public opposition to trains operating without adequately trained guards, because this has a negative impact on rail safety.

Turkish glass workers strike

On May 24, workers in Turkey began a strike that halted 90 percent of glass production in the country. The action, called by the glass, cement, ceramic and earth workers' union Kristal-Is, involves some 6,000 workers at the major glass production companies within Turkey's Sise-Cam group.

The dispute is centred on the issues of pay and subcontracting, and negotiations between Sise-Cam and Kristal-Is have been ongoing since December 2000. The talks recently broke down over the company's refusal to increase workers' pay in line with inflation. The company is citing the International Monetary Fund programme for Turkey that has called for cuts in workers real wages.

Congo teachers strike in defiance of government threats

Teachers in Congo-Brazzaville are defying a government ruling declaring their week-old strike illegal. The country's education authorities threatened severe sanctions against any teachers who refused to start work this week, but schools across the country have remained closed.

In response to the threat, the teachers' union Fenatrec is demanding the reinstatement of salaries, which were cut by 15 percent, as well as 12 months back pay. Meanwhile, the government says it wants to hold talks with all civil service unions rather than conducting separate negotiations with the teachers.

Other civil servants have had their pay cut by 25

percent since 1995, as part of Congo's structural adjustment programme.

Miners strike at Palabora, South Africa

On May 22, the Palabora Mining Company locked out workers belonging to the National Union of Miners (NUM), in response to a strike over wages and housing allowances. The workers had refused to start the 6.00am shift and had gathered outside the main gate of the mine. Company Chairman Wells Ntuli said, "the company informed the NUM that should intimidation of any nature occur against employees wanting to report for duty or any visitors to the mine the situation will be dealt with swiftly and effectively."

The strike and lockout follow the failure to reach an agreement after two weeks of negotiations on wages and conditions of employment. The NUM is demanding a 13 percent increase in wages, plus a housing allowance of 1,000 rand (\$126) a month. Palabora's initial offer of an 8.5 percent increase has been reduced to 8 percent since the strike began.

Strike at South African refinery

Two hundred temporary workers went on strike at the Engen refinery in Wentworth, near Durban, on May 21. The workers, who are employed by five different sub-contractors, were protesting about their tax deductions. Management at the refinery claim that the strikers were throwing stones and breaking windows and chairs. They used the strike, which has been declared illegal, to justify running down an essential maintenance programme and shed about 1,000 contract jobs. The refinery supplies about 15 percent of South Africa's fuel requirements.

Two nights later, four people were wounded by police gunfire in clashes between Wentworth police and a crowd that had gathered at the refinery to discuss the dispute. Management responded by forcing a shutdown of the refinery and more than 3,000 temporary workers were sent home.

Neville Eve, a manager at the refinery, said Engen would reschedule the maintenance programme, cutting the contract labour force by about 30 percent. He said they would finalise a revised schedule by the weekend, and the affected workers would be given just one shift's notice terminating their contracts.

A temporary employee at the refinery was killed at the plant on May 28 and another seriously injured when they were sprayed with highly toxic hydrofluoric acid,

which is used in the refining process. The accident happened at about 10.00am during essential maintenance work. Eve said the shut down period for maintenance could not be extended as "we have a business to run".

South African rail workers fight extension of the working week

Rail workers have been on a national strike for over two weeks, after their employer, Spoornet, demanded an increase in the working week from 40 to 44 hours as a precondition for a pay rise.

A statement by the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (Satawu) said it was willing to meet management to find a settlement to end the strike. Spoornet has reached agreement with two other unions—Tatu and Saltaff—which accepted the 7.5 percent wage offer. The two unions agreed that a 44-hour working week would be phased in gradually.

Honest Sinama, a spokesman for Satawu that represents the lowest paid workers, said they were demanding a 10 percent wage increase. "We are also demanding that Spoornet should retain our 40-hour working week."

The management offer also includes conditions such as reducing sick leave from 150 days to 90 days in any three-year period. Other issues that led to the breakdown in negotiations were the provident fund, medical aid and housing subsidy.

Strike of communal workers throughout Niger

Municipalities throughout Niger were paralysed for four days last week by a strike called by the Union of Communal Workers to protest about the salary arrears owed to its members.

In a statement, the union said that almost all *communes* (local authorities) owe many months salary arrears to their workers, and that even the capital, Niamey, owes two months.



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