Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

7 June 2001

Striking steelworkers at Sheffield foundry sacked

Steelworkers striking against massive pay cuts at William Cook's foundry operations in Sheffield have been sacked. Company chairman Andrew Cook announced Tuesday that the firm had closed its IMF Foundry and drastically reduced its operations at the Heavy Foundry. The closure and restructuring involves 80 job losses.

The strike began after management had demanded workers sign new contracts, which included significant pay cuts for employees at the firm's Heavy Foundry site and at the IMF Foundry. Some 99 workers held several one-day strikes in April and also organized a work-to-rule in protest at the £130 ($184) a week pay cut, after which management locked them out. The firm has already replaced a number of the strikers with scab labour.

The main union representing the strikers, the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU), has done everything to isolate the dispute, refusing to call a company-wide strike or seek solidarity action from other steelworkers in the city. (*See Also*: Sheffield steel workers locked out following dispute over pay cuts http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/jun2001/shef-j02.shtml)

London Underground union calls off proposed strikes

On June 1, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) called off two planned strikes by London Underground workers due to take place on Monday June 4 and Wednesday June 6, on the eve of today's general election. The union's assistant general secretary Bob Crow announced that the strikes had been cancelled following talks with Underground management. The union said it had secured an agreement that there would be no compulsory redundancies and that all staffing levels would be subject to prior negotiation.

The strikes were to be held as a part of a long-running dispute over jobs, working conditions and safety, under the proposed Public-Private Partnership (PPP) being introduced by the Labour government to hive off part of London Underground's operation to the private sector.

The agreement not to implement “compulsory redundancies” does not exclude job losses; it simply means that the RMT will be involved in negotiations over staffing reductions.

London Mayor Ken Livingstone was involved in the negotiations that have lead to the union climb down, saying "I very much welcome this decision."

UK postal workers vote at annual conference to oppose privatisation of service

Delegates to the annual conference of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) voted on June 3 to organise national strikes if any part of Consignia (the new name for the Post Office) is contracted out or sold off to the private sector.

Such action would halt mail deliveries across Britain follows an announcement by the government threatening to privatise the postal delivery services. The CWU represents some 180,000 postal workers throughout the UK.

The emergency motion, supported by the majority of the 1,200 delegates in Bournemouth, England said that the Post Office was seeking to set up a "cut-price, non-union operation" in a major city such as Liverpool. It also noted that the "Labour government has the privatisation of the postal business as one of its main priorities after the election".

Labour's election manifesto states that it will create "alliances and joint ventures" with commercial operators and networks abroad as part of a restructuring of the Post Office.

The German transnational Siemens and the French state-owned La Poste Corporation have both said they would be interested in taking over part of Britain's mail deliveries if they were opened up to private companies.

Spanish airline pilots set to strike over new contract proposals

The Spanish pilots' union Sepla is set to decide whether its members will take strike action against the Iberia airline. The union is in dispute over a new collective wage deal. Iberia is demanding that a four-year wage deal, with a 12 percent increase in pay, be linked to productivity improvements and the airline's future profit margins. The union is demanding that the new deal be unconditional and not linked to any productivity increases.

Iberia has said that the wage increase would cost an additional annual amount of 28.8 million euros ($24.6m) and without any productivity improvement could endanger its 2001 profit target of 72.12m euros ($61.6m).

Air Afrique workers protest in 11 countries

Air Afrique workers have shown their opposition to management plans to restructure and privatise the airline over the past weeks by blocking the loading and unloading of baggage from Air France flights at airports in Abidjan, the capital of the Côte d'Ivoire, and other cities.

Last week, angry Air Afrique workers protested across 11 countries holding a stake in the African airline against the

World Bank's alleged proposal to liquidate the company. In a letter to the Chadian and Ivorian transport ministers, the vice-president of the World Bank's Africa division had proposed two possible solutions for ending the airline's long-running crisis; both involved the liquidation of the company.

Management then issued a denial of rumours that it had recommended the liquidation of the airline, but their statement confirmed that they planned to restructure and privatise it, saying this was "a realistic and coherent programme to ensure timely flights." The statement also described plans to transform Abidjan and Dakar, in Senegal, into regional hubs and take steps to "bring the carrier back to financial health".

The World Bank representative in Abidjan also claimed on Thursday that it had not proposed liquidation of the airline and stressed it was only forwarding the recommendation of a US body specialising in air transport.

Strikes and other forms of protest by Air Afrique workers have increased since January, when a temporary administrator, Jeffrey Erickson, took over the task of restructuring the company in preparation for privatisation. Erickson, a former US executive, initially wanted to make half the 4,000 staff redundant. He later backtracked, offering voluntary retirement, but the management and unions are in dispute over the redundancy terms.

The company has been in financial crisis since 1993, with some $450 million of debt. Created in 1961, 11 sub-Saharan states—Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Chad, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Togo—hold a 68.44 percent stake in the airline. The remaining shares are held by Air France (11.84 percent), the French state development agency (8.87 percent) and three smaller shareholders.

Zambian public service workers to continue strike

Zambian public service workers, including nurses, junior doctors and teachers, have been on strike since the end of last month. Five public sector unions have rejected the 35 percent salary increment offered by the government and have insisted on a 100 percent increase to offset the effects of inflation, which has run at over 25 percent for at least the last six years.

Following a meeting with President Frederick Chiluba on Sunday May 27, the unions—the Zambia National Union of Teachers (ZNUT), Civil Servants' Union of Zambia, National Union of Public Service Workers (NUPSW), Primary Education Teachers' Union of Zambia and the Secondary School Teachers' Union—issued a joint statement upholding their demands.

The statement pointed out that the government offer was too little, as the lowest paid would end up with an increment of only 61,000 kwacha ($22). "We maintain our demand for 100 per cent salary increase for our members representing 176,000 kwacha [$63] across the board for the lowest paid employees."

The unions denied the government claim, made through the Central Board of Health, that they had rejected a 100 percent increase offered to health sector staff. "To the contrary, we are on record as having welcomed the increment when it was announced by the then health minister, Enoch Kavindele, now Republican Vice-President... Our position remains the same. We still insist that government effects, without delay, the 100 percent offered to health workers."

Public service workers in Choma, Zambia vowed on Monday this week to continue their strike action until all their demands were met. Addressing public sector workers at the council chambers yesterday, Civil Servants Union of Zambia (CSUZ) branch chairman Peter Malasa said, if the government does not honour its demands, the union will petition for early elections. He said civil servants and other public service workers have been subjected to slave wages, despite the continued depreciation of the kwacha. He said the government had subjected public service workers to abject poverty, and noted that 80 percent of those below the poverty line in Zambia were public sector workers.

Malasa denounced the disparities in the recent proposed salary increases for health workers. He cited the annual salary increment for senior resident doctors, which would raise their pay by 608 percent—from 3.4 million to 27.1 million kwacha ($1,223 to $9,750). However, this did not apply to nursing staff, clinical officers and paramedics, whose salary would only rise 44 percent to 3.7 million kwacha ($1,330).

CSUZ branch secretary Zooman Mbewe said the only language the government understood was a strike, "There is enough for everyone if only we care enough, however, there is not enough to satisfy the [government's] kind of greed and misplaced priorities."

Chief government spokesman Vernon Mwaanga admitted that the strike had adversely affected government operations, crippling several state institutions. Dr. Silwamba, director of the Central Board of Health, claimed the strike had affected the health delivery system in the country. Most schools have closed and pupils are being sent away because teachers are also on strike.