

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

21 June 2001

French airport workers march the runways

Nearly 3,000 airline employees marched on runways at Paris' Orly airport last Wednesday. They were carrying through a threat to strike over a plan to eliminate hundreds of jobs at AOM and Air Liberté. The action grounded the two companies' flights from the French capital's second-largest airport.

Earlier in the day, demonstrators had marched on the airport's south runway but they were not in use at the time. Police tried in vain to stop the protesters from advancing. At rush hour, traffic along the national 7 highway, which leads to Orly, was halted because protesters were on the road.

The protest has not affected other companies' flights, Aéroport de Paris authorities said. Workers from the two companies were joined by employees of Aéroport de Paris and the Charles de Gaulle airport. All AOM and Air Liberté flights to and from Orly on Tuesday were canceled because of the protest.

Workers from AOM and Air Liberté walked off the job last month to protest planned layoffs after AOM and Air Liberté joined forces last year. The operator recently announced a restructuring plan, which includes 1,328 layoffs, equivalent to 20 percent of the 6,000-person work force.

The two airlines reported a net loss of 2.4 billion francs (\$321 million) for 2000.

Lufthansa pilots begin vote

Pilots at the German airline Lufthansa began voting Monday on a pay package that is the result of a four-month dispute and two strikes at Europe's second largest airline. Pilots have until July 6 to vote and the new contract takes effect if at least 50 percent approve it.

The proposed contract offers a 28.7 percent raise—including performance-related pay—in the first year. In the second year, pilots are guaranteed a 2.8 percent raise, plus an additional raise based on average pay settlements in other German industries and another boost based on the company's profits. The third year's salaries will be based only on average pay settlements and profits, with no guaranteed amount.

"I have no doubt that the decision will be accepted," said Georg Fongern, spokesman for the pilots union Vereinigung Cockpit, which represents 80 percent of Lufthansa's 4,200 pilots.

A starting Lufthansa pilot now nets a base salary of about \$50,000 a year, while a veteran can earn up to \$140,000.

To push for their demands, pilots staged two 24-hour strikes in May, forcing the German carrier to cancel hundreds of flights and costing the company more than \$23 million.

Last week, Lufthansa blamed the pay package and the strikes for forcing the company to slash its estimate for this year's operating profit. The company scrapped an earlier earnings forecast of 1 billion euros (\$850 million), and said profit should come in between 700 million euros and 750 million euros (\$595 million and \$637 million).

British Royal staff in strike ballot

Staff working for the Queen have voted in a ballot over whether to accept new pay rises.

The increases, between 2.5 percent to 16 percent, were negotiated by the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) union, which organised to ballot its members on the deal.

According to Buckingham Palace, about half of the 700 Royal employees were awarded a five percent increase and no one received less than 2.5 percent.

The pay rises come in the wake of recent publicity that some Palace staff were among the lowest-paid workers in the country and had to rely on welfare benefits.

The pay deal follows an extensive staff review, during which the number of pay grades has been cut from 100 to 40, covering everyone from the Lord Chamberlain, Lord Luce, who is the head of the Royal Household, to gardeners, kitchen staff and footmen.

Based on job advertisements placed prior to the proposed wage increases, junior kitchen porters and housemaids earn between £9,000 and £9,500. An under-footman earns about £10,000 while a footman earns £11,500 to £12,000. Their duties include acting as valets for male guests.

Around five percent of Royal staff belong to a union. As well as the PCS, some workers belong to the Transport and General Workers' Union, and the Institution of Professional Managers and Specialists.

Local UK government workers strike over pay restructuring

Up to 800 local government workers could face wage cuts of up to £100 a week if their employer, North East Lincolnshire Council, goes ahead with a new job evaluation scheme as part of a national pay restructuring agreement.

More than 100 employees of North East Lincolnshire council staged a lightning one-day strike this week in protest at the authority's attempt to impose the new wages structure, and further industrial action looks likely. The strike is believed to be the first case involving the job evaluation scheme, and many councils and unions will be keeping a close eye on developments.

Only a handful of councils have reached the same stage as North East Lincolnshire in implementing the single status agreement.

Unison, the biggest trade union at the authority, has accused North East Lincolnshire of renegeing on an agreement to cushion the blow for those employees whose wages will be reduced as part of the pay parity scheme. The union claims that the council agreed to set aside £1.75m to finance the new wages structure. Part of that would go towards protecting for five years staff whose jobs were re-graded at a lower rate.

The new wages structure would be implemented at nil cost, leaving no financial cushion for those whose salaries would be slashed under the new pay regime. Over 800 employees will be adversely affected and some families will now have to sell up and move away, or at least buy a cheaper house than the one in which they already live. A typical married couple with a young family, who are employed in the

authority's social services will lose around £11,000 per annum under the new scheme.

Spanish pilots strike over pay claim

Hundreds of flights were cancelled this week as pilots from the Spanish airline Iberia stage a 24-hour strike over a pay claim. The pilots' union, Sepla, is demanding a pay increase of three percent above inflation, and compensation for a pay freeze imposed in 1995.

More than a quarter of the airline's 1,000 scheduled domestic and international flights have been cancelled. Services to European destinations were hardest hit, with 37 percent of flights were cancelled. The strikes are set to continue every Tuesday in June and July, and every Monday in August, equalling a total of 10 days.

Economy Minister Rodrigo Rato said the government would not get involved in a dispute at a private company, but he said he disapproved of "using customers as hostages".

At Heathrow Airport in London, 10 of the 14 daily Iberia flights to Madrid were cancelled, along with six out of eight flights to Barcelona.

Iberia's Chief Executive, Angel Mullor, said in an interview published on Sunday that the strikes would reduce profits by billions of pesetas.

After industrial action in March 1999, it took eight months for reservations to get back to normal. Iberia is now part owned by British Airways and American Airlines. The company was launched on the stock exchange in April, and on Monday shares fell to their lowest rate since privatisation.

The company and unions held nearly 12 hours of talks on Monday, in a bid to settle the dispute, but the discussions ended in acrimony. Iberia bosses said meeting the pay claim would plunge the company into an operating loss. But a Sepla spokeswoman said union negotiators were angry that Iberia's chief executive did not attend the meeting.

Zimbabwean postal strike bites in Harare

As of Monday this week, Zimbabwean postal workers have brought the country's postal service to a halt. More than 10,000 workers are on strike, demanding a cost-of-living increase in wages at a time of soaring inflation.

Gift Chimankire, secretary general of the PTC Workers' Union said, "The strike is continuing tomorrow, and it is likely to continue until we get written commitments on cost of living adjustments."

The union has already taken the state Postal and Telecommunications Corporation (PTC) to court, after management unilaterally decided last year to reduce an agreed salary increase of 300 percent down to 10 percent. In March the High Court delayed its decision on the case. Chimankire said the workers want a 60 percent cost of living adjustment as an interim measure until the court hands down a decision.

The strike began last Saturday, with workers in Harare and Bulawayo staying away from their jobs, bringing the postal service to a halt in the nation's two largest cities. On Monday, the action became a full national strike, with workers in small towns observing the strike call.

Zimbabwe is currently in the midst of its worst-ever economic crisis, with the real value of wages slumping, inflation and unemployment rates over 60 percent, and a desperate shortage of foreign currency.

A general strike in Zimbabwe is increasingly likely, due to a fuel price increase of 70 percent, announced on Wednesday by President Robert Mugabe's government. The measure is bound to drive the economy further into recession and cause unemployment to rise still

further, in addition to its immediate effect of deepening poverty.

Zambia: Public sector strike continues, crisis deepens

The month-long strike by Zambian public sector workers, is set to continue. Around 80,000 public servants, including nurses, teachers and judicial workers began their strike in mid-May in support of their demand for a 100 percent wage rise. However, the government continues to claim that it can only raise wages by 35 percent.

The action has brought hundreds of schools and hospitals to a standstill and slowed the delivery of other key government services. Most hospitals across the country have had to scale down their operations, in some cases by closing up to half of their admission wards. Most schools in the country have suspended classes on account of the teachers' strike, sparking off student riots in several districts.

In Lusaka, police have released hundreds of suspects who are awaiting trial so as to reduce overcrowding of the cells, as support staff in the judicial service continue their industrial action, leaving the courts with a growing backlog of cases.

The Zambian Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) has threatened to sabotage next month's summit of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), due to be held in Lusaka, unless the government agrees to their demands. They claim that the money to be spent on hosting the summit should be better spent on increasing workers' wages. Many government employees, including teachers and nurses, are paid less than US\$50 a month, putting them below the poverty datum line.

While the media is presently preoccupied with the parliamentary motion to impeach President Frederick Chiluba, the scale of the social crisis underlying the political tensions is deepening apace.

Namibian Strikers block Shell vehicles

Striking members of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN) picketed Shell's depot at Windhoek on Monday and prevented delivery vehicles from entering or leaving the plant. The strikers are demanding a wage increase of 14 percent.

Shell management has broken off negotiations after offering seven percent. They claim the strike is illegal and is not supported by all union members. But a spokesman for the MUN has confirmed that the strike is supported by workers at the Tsumeb, Mariental and Grootfontein depots.



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