

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

28 June 2001

Russian strikers oppose new labour code

Last Tuesday, Russian dockworkers in the Far East, Murmansk, Novorossiisk and St. Petersburg stopped work in opposition to the new Labour Code. In Moscow, small groups picketed outside the Duma (Russian parliament) and nearby industrial enterprises. "We believe that trade unions in no fewer than 60 cities organised such actions and at least 100,000 people participated," Oleg Shein, a member of the Duma's labour committee, said in a telephone interview.

The workers' protests were in support of an alternative draft of the Labour Code drawn up by Shein, one of seven that will be presented to the Duma on July 5 for a first reading. Only the government draft, now supported by the Federation of Independent Unions of Russia, which claims to represent 40 million workers, is likely to win approval. Last December, the Federation organised a week of protests against the Labour Code, forcing Labour Minister Alexander Pochinok to seek an arrangement with the Federation. Last Tuesday, the State Duma agreed to take up the new Labour Code on July 5, with the Federation's support, although what changes have been made, if any, are not clear.

According to the new Code employers will be given the power to fire workers without union consent. It also allows employers to extend the working week to 58 hours from the current 40 hours and to employ workers on a contract basis rather than as staff, which in many cases means they are not provided with social benefits. It allows up to 20 percent of wages to be paid "in kind", i.e. in the form of goods and services rather than money. Employers in Russia have been paying workers in kind for many years; everything from tinned pineapples to manure, meat grinders and coffins have been given in lieu of wages.

Even the miserly demand in Shein's draft proposal that wages be at least at subsistence level, now reckoned to be an average of 1,400 roubles (US\$48) a month, was considered beyond the pale. Pochinok called it an impossible demand that would require billions of roubles from the budget.

Retail workers end Paris blockade

400 striking workers employed by the British department store Marks and Spencer (M&S) ended their siege of the company's French headquarters in Paris on the evening of June 22. The workers had blockaded the building on Boulevard Haussmann, one of the French capital's main shopping areas, after all night pay talks broke down. Another 20 workers

remain in occupation of a nearby M&S branch.

Marks and Spencer announced in March that it was closing its 38 stores in continental Europe, including all 18 in France, to concentrate on its more profitable British market.

The workers insist on dealing with a representative from the main headquarters in Britain rather than with Alain Juillet, chairman of M&S in France, but a union delegate said that Juillet had left little room to discuss a deal over pay rates during the main sales season. The union proposal for 12,000 francs (US\$1,600) bonus for each employee has been rejected by management in favour of a complex sliding scale based on salary. Juillet has said he is "still looking for someone to take over the company, with discussions to begin in the next few days."

French magnesium workers continue struggle against plant closure

Workers at the Pechiney magnesium factory in Marignac, France held a protest June 20 at the company's headquarters to oppose plans to close the factory.

A delegation of workers held former factory director Gerard Philiponneau in his office for two days. Philiponneau was welcoming his successor to the factory when the delegation entered the building to protest the closure. The occupation ended after a local authority official asked police to intervene.

In May, Philiponneau was also locked into his office overnight during a similar protest when the plant's 250 workers occupied for 24 hours following Pechiney's initial closure announcement. A local judge has ruled that a delegation of unions and company representatives negotiate to study the plant's future.

Romanian steelworkers go on hunger strike

Trade union leaders of the 2,500-member NTUF union, from the steel plant in the Romanian city of Resita, launched a hunger strike on June 19. Exactly one year earlier, the US-based Noble Ventures bought the majority stock of the steel plant from Resita authorities. In January this year, production at the plant was stopped but employees have not been paid since April. The protesters intend to continue the hunger strike until the salaries are paid.

Rail workers in UK strike in dispute over safety

On June 25, a 24-hour strike by guards working for the c2c rail company in southern England disrupted services between London and Southend, Essex. During the stoppage c2c could only run 11 of its normal 47 rush-hour services. Workers are set

to hold a further 24-hour stoppage on July 4 and the company has said it intends to hold talks with the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union to avert this.

The strike was called by the RMT as part of a campaign against train operators' proposals to downgrade the job descriptions of guards, thus jeopardising safety. The previous week 18 of 20 other train companies in dispute with the RMT reached a settlement with the union. On June 20, the RMT called off two 24-hour strikes due to be held on June 25 and July 4 on South West Trains. Another of the operators, Midland Mainline, successfully challenged the strike ballot in a private court case in Leeds.

Retail workers in Ireland to strike over pay

Staff at Tesco, Britain's largest chain of supermarket stores, intend to strike June 29 in the company's 75 outlets in the Republic of Ireland. Officials for the SIPTU and Mandate unions state that unless talks with the company make "real and substantial progress", a further strike will take place on July 5. SIPTU members voted 93 percent in favour of taking industrial action earlier this month.

The 9,500 workers are calling for an increase in pay. Workers at Tesco in Ireland start on a wage of 4.85 punts (US\$5.32) per hour. This is just above minimum wage levels. After 10 years of service this increases to just 7.41 punts (US\$8.13) an hour. The union has said that Tesco is one of the lowest payers in the Irish retail industry.

Dynamex workers in Wales continue strike

Workers at the Dynamex Friction car components factory in Caernarfon voted Wednesday to continue their strike. The 87 workers, members of the Transport & General Workers Union (T&GWU) have been in dispute with the plant's American owners for nine weeks over changes to working practices—including a proposed 15 percent wage cut.

The workers were locked out by management just five days into the dispute. Temporary staff have subsequently been hired to scab as negotiations between management, the union and the conciliation service ACAS failed to find agreement.

Workers were sent letters telling them that they must agree to the changes and return to work by 0900 hours June 27 or be dismissed. At a mass meeting the same day, however, the workers voted unanimously to reject management threats and continue their dispute.

800 South African metal workers on strike

A strike by more than 800 metal workers is taking place at the X-Strata company in Rustenburg, South Africa, after 200 workers were either made redundant or laid off on only 25 percent of their basic salary. The company also suspended the laid-off workers' membership of the medical aid scheme.

The spokesman of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), Dumisa Ntuli, said that the metal industry "is currently losing 2,000 workers per month in the engineering sector." Ntuli said the company failed to look at alternatives to the layoffs, such as re-deployment within the

company. The union is demanding those laid off receive 75 percent of the workers' basic salary, 100 percent pension fund contributions, continued membership of the medical aid scheme, payments of R30,000 (US\$3,748) to all retrenched workers, and that the layoffs be reviewed in two weeks time.

NUMSA has threatened to organise other metal workers to take part in a solidarity strike with the X-Strata workers, but it has thus far refused to mount any serious opposition to the wave of sackings in the industry.

Workers' actions in Zambia undermined by union leadership

Attempts are being made to break the strike by Zambian public sector workers that began mid-May in support of the demand for a 100 percent wage rise. Leaders of the Secondary School Teachers Union of Zambia (Sestuz) accepted a salary increase of just 40 percent—well below the rate of inflation—and issued instructions to resume work after their talks with the government. Some teachers have followed the union's instructions to return to work, while others at Chifubu and Kansenshi secondary schools stayed away because their union representatives had agreed to the salary increment without informing them.

In a statement released after a meeting last Thursday, the union's provincial executive in the town of Ndola demanded the resignation of the national executive committee because they acted with "trickery and insincerity". The statement said that the union members had given the national executive strict instructions not to accept the 40 percent salary increment.

The government are making the most out of the confusion, by issuing disinformation to the effect that a 95 percent pay rise has been awarded to members of the Civil Servants Union of Zambia (CSUZ), and calling on the teachers' union to call off the strike. The CSUZ said that there was no mention of such a figure by the two parties in the negotiations. The government has previously offered 35 percent to the civil servants.

At Ndola Central Hospital, workers marched to the administration building and demonstrated for several hours on Monday, demanding the removal of union officials. Nurses and paramedics sang songs and chanted slogans and blocked the entrance to the administration offices.

In the city of Kitwe, the local council attempted to break the strike by employing street children to collect garbage. After protests pointing out such action is illegal, they decided to hire a firm of contractors instead.



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