Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

5 July 2001

Air France workers and toll road workers strike in France

On June 29, Air France flight attendants began a four-day strike in a dispute over salary increases and bonuses. The stoppage took place at the beginning of the summer holidays in France when more than three million holidaymakers usually travel.

Air France estimated that up to 100 flights out of Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris could be cancelled during the strike.

On the same day a strike by hundreds of toll collectors took place. The workers are calling for higher pay and earlier retirement at 55 years of age. The stoppage led to a number of traffic jams along several major highways. The CGT-Transport Union called the strike.

The action was the sixth time since October that tollbooth workers have gone on strike. Near the southern city of Lyon, an eight-kilometre (five-mile) traffic jam was formed as toll operators blocked 26 of 30 booths.

Spanish bus drivers end strike over pay

On July 3 Spanish bus drivers in the region of the Balearics ended a three-day strike that affected thousands of holidaymakers in Majorca, Minorca and Ibiza. The workers were striking in a pay dispute. The strike was called off when the two main unions involved signed an agreement with the travel and transport companies. A spokeswoman for the Balearic Institute of Tourism said, “They have guaranteed that there will be no more strikes in the Balearics.” The agreement was signed in Palma in Majorca and extends to Majorca, Minorca and Ibiza, she said.

Tesco workers strike over pay in Ireland

Tesco supermarket workers in the Irish Republic struck all 76 Tesco stores on June 29 in a dispute over pay. The action involved some 9,500 workers and led to the closure of the stores for 24 hours. The stoppage was called by the Mandate trade union and a second one-day strike is scheduled for July 5. Tesco is Ireland’s biggest retailer, with a 24 percent market share and the strike was estimated to have cost the company up to IR£4 million.

Workers demonstrate over the loss of 520 jobs in Newport, Wales

More than 500 people joined a march and rally on June 30 in the town of Newport in Wales over the proposed loss of 520 jobs at a telecomm equipment manufacturers. Members of the public supported workers at the Solectron factory at Cwmcarn. The march was called by the Communication Workers’ Union (CWU).

The company announced the job losses in as part of a restructuring programme to turn the Newport plant into a service-based operation. Under law a 90-day “consultation period” is currently taking place. During the protest workers gathered outside the plant and released hundreds of black balloons to symbolise the jobs that were to be lost. The company has refused to back down, stating that it would only maintain 168 jobs and add a further 17 new jobs in the global services section at the plant.

Sacked engineering workers in Wales have dispute discussed at union conference

On July 2, workers at the Dynamex Friction engineering company at Caernarfon, sacked following a strike against pay cuts and longer hours, had their case discussed at the annual conference of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU).

The 87 workers became the first employees to be sacked since the introduction of new employment legislation preventing companies from dismissing workers for the first eight weeks of a dispute. The workers began their dispute in April in opposition to a 15 percent pay cut amounting to about £40 a week, the ending of shift pay and introduction of longer working days with no overtime. The staff voted by a large majority to strike, but were then locked out by the company and issued with redundancy notices by registered post last week.

The workers have had no pay increase at the Dynamex factory since it was bought by American businessman Craig Smith in 1997. The TGWU state that for the past two years management has effectively banned union meetings on the site. At the conference Bill Morris, the general secretary of the TGWU, acknowledged “the inadequacies of the current law to give protection to workers engaged in lawful industrial action”, but promised only to ask “the government to bring forward a review of the legislation which events show provides no protection against anti-union employers.”

Zimbabwe national strike gets wide support

Unions in Zimbabwe held a two-day national strike this week, against a government decision to raise fuel prices by an average of 70 percent. Press reports indicate that over two million workers did not report for work and most factories, shops and banks closed down in the main urban centers. This was despite repeated warnings on the state radio that workers should report for work because the strike was illegal.

There were no pickets, rallies or demonstrations as the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) told workers to stay at home to avoid violence. The strike appears to have taken place largely without conflict, despite the government putting the Zimbabwe National Army and police on standby.

The ZCTU had given the government a two-week deadline to reverse the fuel price increases. That deadline expired Friday. Zimbabwe has suffered chronic fuel shortages for the past 18 months and prices have tripled over the same period, sending fares soaring on the minibuses used by most urban workers to commute. The tensions following the latest price increases boiled over into riots in two of Harare’s outlying townships on June 18, with police firing tear-gas.

ZCTU Secretary General Wellington Chibebe said, “Studies show that a family of four needs Z$14,000 [£180] per month for food, rent and other expenses. Many of our workers are only earning Z$3,000 [£37] per month. So you can see how desperate our workers are.”

The ZCTU is closely linked to the western-backed opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and has previously resisted pressure for strike action, despite massive job losses and widespread state intimidation. The present action is widely seen as part of the MDC’s campaign for the presidential elections, due to take place next year, although the official stance of the MDC was not to take part in the strike.

The government backed war veterans have been trying to win away the MDC’s base of support in the labour movement, by launching a rival Federation of Trade Unions. Their intimidation campaign has met with little success, but is likely to be stepped up after this successful strike.

Zambia: Public Sector workers win pay rise

The six week long strike by 150,000 public sector worker in Zambia has ended with the government granting pay increases ranging from 81 to 91 percent. Unions had been demanding rises from 100 to 250 percent, but the award nevertheless represents a climb down by the government due to its concern that the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) summit in Lusaka next week would not take place because of the strike. Senior OAU officials are reported to have put pressure on Zambian President Frederick Chiluba to settle the strike because it posed a security threat to the summit.

Civil Servants’ Union leader Leonard Hikaumba warned the government not to renege on the agreement after the summit ended. Public sector workers were paid between US $50 and US $71 a month, compared to an average monthly bill for water and electricity of US $60. The strike hit most public services, forcing hospitals to stay open with skeleton staff and closing down schools.