Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

26 July 2001

Rail workers in Germany demonstrate against job losses

On July 19, 10,000 rail workers demonstrated in Berlin, Germany, in protest at the railway operator Deutsche Bahn's proposal to slash 6,000 jobs by the end of 2003.

The leader of rail workers' union Transnet, Norbert Hansen said at the rally that the union could call strikes during the summer leading to the national disruption of rail services. Transnet claims that the redundancies are in contravention of an agreement made in February 2001, which obliges the railway operator to find further employment for all workers affected by future job cuts. The union is also demanding that it be included in any talks and decisions relating to restructuring.

The job losses were announced in June and would mean the closure of eight of its 18 main workshops along with the loss of further jobs in another 10. The company has stated that the maintenance work on carriages will be reduced in the next few years, as it is to invest DM8.5 billion in new rolling stock by 2005.

Portuguese ground crews strike at major airports

Airline ground crew workers in Portugal held a strike on July 19 and 20 to protest a pay offer of just 2.9 percent increase from the state owned airline TAP Air Portugal.

The strike involved some 10 unions representing about 4,600 state airline employees and affected flights at all the main international airports in the country—Lisbon airport as well as those in Faro, Oporto and Funchal. The ground crews are responsible for check-ins and baggage handling as well as the maintenance and repair of aircraft. Faro airport is widely used by British travellers flying to the Algarve for holidays.

In an attempt to limit the impact of the stoppage, the company rescheduled flights and moved some passengers to other airlines. Prior to the strike the government appealed to unions to call off the action but this was rejected.

Greek museums and archaeological site staff strike over contract renewals and pay

Museums and archaeological site staff in the Greek capital of Athens began strike action on July 19 in a dispute over contract renewals for seasonal workers and a pay bonus. The Culture Ministry employs the workers who are based at sites and monuments such as the Parthenon. The strikes are to be held indefinitely with a series of rolling 48-hour stoppages, pending a settlement

Fire fighters in Merseyside continue strike action in recruitment dispute

Fire fighters in Merseyside, England began a second strike on July 23 in a dispute over the Merseyside Fire Authority plan's to recruit un-uniformed staff for senior posts. The fire fighters held an eight-day strike earlier this month beginning on July 13. The action involves some 1,400 workers.

The Fire Brigades Union has called the strike. On July 24, the union threatened to escalate the strike to a national level. The general secretary of the union Andy Gilchrist said the union had written to the National Joint Council, the fire service's employer-employee forum. The union asked the council to repudiate the proposed plan of the Merseyside Fire Authority and to state that the authority acted improperly and in breach of the "nationally negotiated machinery".

He said that if the National Joint Council refused to do this then a meeting would be held in Liverpool on August 3 to call for "national industrial action in support of our Merseyside members."

Conoco tanker drivers in UK to be balloted for industrial action

Tanker drivers in the UK employed by the oil transnationaal, Conoco, are to be balloted on industrial action in a dispute concerning the contracting out of their employment. The ballot proposal was announced this week and is will be completed by August 9.The drivers who are members of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) stand to lose up to £3,000 a year if their jobs are contracted out to another company.

TGWU National Officer, Danny Bryan, said that Conoco are seeking to contract out the work of members but cannot guarantee that their pay, terms and conditions

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will remain the same. “It appears they are prepared to see new employees treated as second class if these changes go ahead” Bryan said. The union said there were no provisions to protect pensions, share options and profit related pay, which formed a “significant” part of drivers’ wages.

UK train drivers union call off strike after reaching settlement with company

The drivers union ASLEF has called off a series of strikes to be held by train drivers employed by First North Western trains in England after the two parties were able to reach a settlement on a new 35 hour week contract. The drivers had been due to hold seven 24-hour strikes between July 25 and the end of August.

South African power workers strike

Workers at Eskom, the South African electricity utility began indefinite strike action Tuesday over their annual pay claim. About 23,500 workers belonging to the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Mineworkers’ Union Solidarity (MWU) are involved in a nationwide dispute. Power failures were reported in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga, although Eskom and the unions have a Minimum Service Agreement that excludes key workers from taking strike action. Pickets and demonstrations were reported at many power stations and depots despite the winter conditions. On Wednesday a protest march to Eskom headquarters in central Johannesburg took place.

It appears that Eskom’s unilateral imposition of a pay deal—nine percent for the highest-paid and seven percent for the lowest-paid staff—provoked the strike, with the unions asking for an eleven percent increase for the lowest-paid workers and nine percent for the highest-paid. Eskom have also applied to the Labour Court to stop about 1,000 key workers from striking even though the unions have given written undertakings that they would abide by the minimum service agreement.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) backed the Eskom strike. A spokesperson said that the management had taken a “mischievous, arrogant and union-bashing approach to the wage talks”. Cosatu said that Eskom’s attitude was related to the planned privatisation of the industry contained in the Eskom Conversion Bill. “It is now clear that it [the Bill] is also leading Eskom to adopt a tough policy on wages in order to attract investors. Cosatu insists that workers will not pay for the restructuring of Eskom with retrenchments or poverty wages.”

Unions have also been threatening strike action over annual pay claims in mining, the motor industry, steel and other sectors although a labour analyst is reported as saying that it is largely “posturing”. A strike by 175,000 gold and coal miners is due next week but the employers represented by Chamber of Mines has made a last minute offer to the NUM. “The Chamber is confident that a settlement will be reached on Friday,” it reported. “The union undertook to present the revised offers to its members and to revert to the Chamber at a further meeting scheduled for Friday, July 27.”

In the auto industry NUMSA has threatened to pull out 50,000 members on strike action. Pickets and demonstrations are expected at car plants this week. Last minute negotiations are taking place with the Automobile Manufacturers Employers Organisation. NUMSA is also threatening action in the tyre, rubber and petrol industries over pay and the employment of untrained temporary workers. MWU and the NUM put out a joint statement explaining that negotiations over pay with steel producer Iscor had broken down and they were planning indefinite strike action.

Strike at Alexkor diamond mine, South Africa

A strike of 550 miners at the Alexkor Diamond Mine in the Northern Cape has continued for two weeks as wage negotiations broke down. The company locked out the miners, claiming that its poor financial position made it impossible to increase the wage offer. After several attempts to re-open negotiations and “unlock” the strike have failed, the NUM is bussing in supporters from the region for a demonstration, this Thursday in support of the workers.

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