

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Africa and the Middle East

2 August 2001

## **Airline mechanics strike KLM in the Netherlands**

KLM mechanical engineers launched a wildcat strike July 28 at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport. The dispute involves around 200 engineers who are demanding pay increases of 40 to 130 percent. The workers cited the higher wages being paid to their counterparts working at Northwest Airlines, a KLM partner in the US.

The action, which lasted five hours, resulted in 4,500 passengers being delayed as it was held on the busiest day yet of the summer season. The company postponed all 13 of its international flights from Amsterdam in the morning and early afternoon. The industrial action ended when the company agreed to investigate international salaries for technical ground staff workers. KLM also announced that some flights could be delayed or cancelled the following day as a consequence of the strike.

## **French physicians threaten walkout**

French physicians who deliver babies are threatening to strike this week in a dispute over pay and personal support. The French Health Ministry is currently in talks with Syngof, the national union of gynaecologists and obstetricians union, in an attempt to reach a settlement preventing strike action.

French Health Minister Bernard Kouchner has described the threat of a doctors' strike as "menacing" and "immoral". Labour Minister Elisabeth Guigou said, "We are doing everything to avoid the strike. Doctors have a professional code of ethics that obliges them to face their responsibilities, not to mention the penal code."

## **Postal workers in London strike in dispute over discipline**

Postal workers at the Nine Elms centre in south London walked off the job July 27 in a dispute over a case of disciplinary action. The strike action led to some mail deliveries being delayed in the capital the

following day.

The action occurred just hours before the publication of a report on the state of industrial relations at Royal Mail by Lord Sawyer, the former general secretary of the Labour Party. In the last year some 62,000 days were lost through various strikes by postal workers. Most of these strikes were unofficial and not sanctioned by the postal workers union, the Communication Workers Union.

## **Rail guards in southwest England continue strike**

On August 1, rail guards employed by the c2c train company in the southwest of England held their fourth one-day strike in a long-running dispute over safety. The strike affected c2c services between London and Essex, with the company only able to run one in four scheduled morning and evening peak train services. C2c announced prior to the strike that it intended to carry some 15,000 passengers into London instead of the normal 25,000. Pending a settlement, a further 48-hour strike by the workers, who sell tickets and are in charge of train safety, will be held on August 6.

The company claims that it is no longer in dispute with the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members it employs and that it had offered the union the same proposed settlement that has led to strikes being called off against the other privately owned train operators.

C2c route director David Taylor said, "I believe this dispute has been resolved. A trade dispute no longer exists and continued industrial action is unnecessary and unlawful."

Commenting on the dispute, RMT's Assistant General Secretary Bob Crow said, "C2c want to remove trained guards from nearly all their passenger trains—a practice we believe to be fundamentally unsafe."

## **Merseyside firefighters strike ends after union**

## **accepts new management proposals**

On July 26, striking firefighters returned to work in Merseyside, England after the Fire Brigades Union provisionally agreed a new offer from the Merseyside Fire Authority. The firefighters were participating in a second eight-day strike in a dispute over the recruitment of non-uniformed civilian staff to senior posts when the settlement was made. Under previous national agreements such posts were taken by uniformed firefighters who had a number of years of service.

The Fire Brigades Union said that it would recommend that its members accept the deal. The general secretary of the union, Andy Gilchrist, said, “The Fire Authority have capitulated, and have forwarded a set of words which we will be voting on.”

## **South African miners union weighs offer to avoid strike**

South Africa’s National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) is considering a wage offer from three gold producers meant to avert a strike by 50,000 miners planned to start Wednesday. The country’s number two and three gold mines, Gold Fields and Harmony, and marginal miner Durban Roodepoort Deep (DRD) are the only gold producers that have not yet settled with the NUM over its demand for a 2,000 rand minimum wage and extra leave.

An NUM spokesman said if agreement was reached with Gold Fields and Harmony, but not DRD, the strike would only go ahead at DRD. “There will not be sympathy strikes at other mines that have already settled wage hikes,” said NUM’s Moferefere Lekorotsoana.

## **Student unrest grows in Kenya**

A wave of student unrest shut more than 30 Kenyan schools last month in what commentators see as a sign of growing discontent in a country once heralded as one of Africa’s brightest prospects. Deepening poverty and rising political tension have fuelled a spate of riots, student walkouts and petrol bomb attacks on schools.

Newspapers have blamed mass truancy on drugs, alcohol and even devil worship, but some parents say family structures are under increasing strain in a society ravaged by massive unemployment, ethnic clashes, police brutality and corruption.

## **Twenty arrested after workers protest dismissal in western Iran**

Twenty people were arrested in Iran’s western Hamedan province Tuesday, July 31 after clashes broke out between police and some 300 villagers protesting the dismissal of a factory worker. The clashes in Shahanjerin also left one policeman slightly injured after villagers “attacked the Hegmatan cement factory to protest against the layoff of a labourer from the factory,” according to the state news agency IRNA.

“The rioters entered the building, smashed windows and lab equipment, and damaged the building,” IRNA said, adding that the arrests took place after police intervened to end the riots, which lasted four hours. Labour protests have stepped up over the past few months as Iran faces an official unemployment rate of 15 percent, with unofficial estimates putting the percentage substantially higher.



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