

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

16 August 2001

Belgium airline workers protest redundancies

Workers at the state-owned Belgium airline Sabena took strike action over two days last week to protest against company proposals to shed 1,600 jobs. The action began on August 8, forcing the company to cancel some 150 scheduled flights.

Sabena has initiated a restructuring plan in an attempted to return it to profitability by 2005. The company made a loss of €138.9 million (\$125.5m) in the first half of this year against a net loss of €83.6 million (\$75.5) in the same period last year.

One of the workers' demands is for the company to disclose its full restructuring plans, after reports suggested that Sabena was looking to shed 2,000 jobs. The company intends to cut both its long haul and medium fleet of planes.

Rail workers in south-east England to continue strike action

The Rail Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) has called further strikes against the c2c rail company, based in the southwest of England. The industrial action is the latest in a long-running dispute between the union and the company over the job description of guards and their safety role. This summer RMT members at c2c have held six days of strike action.

This week the union announced that its c2c members would strike for four days between August 25 and 28. The action will mainly affect services on the London to Southend lines run by c2c. But the union has called off a planned five-day overtime ban that was scheduled to begin on August 14.

Miners in south Yorkshire, England protest against colliery closure

Miners at the Hatfield Colliery, near Doncaster, South Yorkshire are planning to hold a march and rally in protest against the pit's closure.

The privately run Hatfield Coal Company Limited closed the mine on August 9 with the loss of 223 jobs.

The company claimed that it was unable to secure the funding needed to maintain production, despite having an agreement to supply coal to the nearby Drax power station.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which is organising the protest march, is currently drawing up plans for a workers buy-out of the coal mine.

Police in Zimbabwe shoot two workers dead

Two workers were shot dead and ten others were seriously injured on August 8, after riot police and soldiers from the Redcliff air base near Kwekwe opened fire on thousands of striking steelworkers. Paul Sibalo, president of the Iron and Steelworkers' Union, identified those killed as Samuel Masivatsva and Never Daniels, employees of Zimbabwe Iron and Steel Company (Ziscosteel). The ten injured workers are in hospital where their condition is described as critical.

More than 4, 000 workers had walked off the job on August 7 in a wages protest. The workers say they are grossly underpaid, with some junior employees earning a gross salary of about 2, 600 Zimbabwean dollars (US\$48) a month, while top management used company money to buy ten luxury cars earlier this year. The government is the company's main shareholder but Ziscosteel has faced severe financial problems, struggling to pay for basic raw materials and even staggering payment of workers' salaries.

The strike was the first since the early 1980s, and has virtually paralysed Ziscosteel. The strikers defied calls by the Ziscosteel managing director Gabriel Masanga to go back to work while their grievances were being "looked into." Sibalo said that trouble begun on the second day of the strike, at about 4:30pm, when riot police fired teargas randomly into the company premises to drive out the workers. The following day, the coke ovens and one blast furnace were reported to have collapsed due to low temperatures and the absence of maintenance staff.

Workers at Lancashire Steel Company in Kwekwe

and at two other Ziscosteel outlets have called strikes in solidarity with their colleagues at the Redcliff plant.

Wage strikes continue in South Africa

The strike at South African automobile manufacturers that began on August 6 is continuing into its second week. The stayaway action by 21,000 autoworkers involves almost 80 percent of those employed in the industry. Seven international corporations—BMW, DaimlerChrysler, Delta, Ford, Nissan, Toyota and Volkswagen—have plants in South Africa that are affected. It is estimated that the auto companies will lose one billion rand (\$120 million) per week because of the strike. At least one of the companies, DaimlerChrysler, has threatened to shift production to its German plants if the strike was not resolved.

The striking workers are about to decide whether to accept an offer by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) to intervene in the dispute. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) has already reduced its wage increase demand from 15 percent to 12 percent but says employers have not shifted from their original offer of 7.5 percent. The Oil, Chemical, General and Allied Workers' Union (Ocgawu), which also represents workers in the industry, accepted the offer and ended its action on August 9. NUMSA has said it will now organise sympathy strikes in support of the stayaway.

Some 5,000 NUMSA members at the Highveld Steel and Vanadium Corporation, who were also taking strike action, agreed to return to work August 7 after accepting a revised wage offer. The union said that the action had succeeded in getting management to increase its wage offer from 6.8 percent to 8 percent.

But 3,000 workers at Hulleys Aluminiums plants are continuing their dispute, which began August 10. The workers are demanding a 15 percent wage increase, while the company is offering 8.7 percent for the lowest-paid workers and 8.1 percent for higher-paid workers.

Teachers to join doctors' strike in Sierra Leone

Teachers in Sierra Leone have said they will not go to work when schools open next month, if they are not paid the five-month's salary arrears they are due. The teachers, appointed following the civil war in the country, had been persuaded by the government to release pupils' grades and results for the past academic year despite the salary backlog. They will now join striking doctors, in dispute for two weeks in protest at a

one-year backlog in their salary payments.



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