

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

27 September 2001

London Underground staff begin overtime ban

London Underground drivers began an overtime ban on September 26, in protest at the lack of staff facilities, including toilets, at some of the capital's subway stations.

The industrial action is part of a work to rule and is expected to lead to severe delays and cancellations of services on the underground. The dispute involves members of the train drivers union Aslef and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union. The District and Piccadilly lines face the most disruption.

In a separate dispute over pay, the result of a union ballot for industrial action is to be announced tomorrow. The unions involved have rejected a management proposal of a four percent pay increase. Strike action could begin as early as next week.

Belgium airline issues restructuring ultimatum to staff

On September 24, the Belgian airline Sabena announced that it would ask its entire 13,000 workforce to vote on its restructuring plan, if unions did not accept the scheme within the next 24 hours.

Workers have held several strikes to protest against the restructuring plan, which proposes to shed some 1,400 jobs (12 percent of the work force) and to cut wages.

Sabena Chief Executive Christophe Mueller made the statement following the break down of talks between the company and union officials. "The only alternative to the business plan is the closure of the company," Mueller threatened.

The company has proposed to halve the 1,400 job losses, but at this stage the unions have not accepted the offer. The trade unions' opposition to management proposals centre around winning more concessions for those workers made redundant under the scheme.

Sabena reported a loss of 138.9 million euros (\$122 million) in the first half of 2001, compared to a loss of 194.2 million euros a year earlier. Since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington two weeks ago, Sabena has reported a loss of 1 million euros (\$910,000) a day because of cancelled flights to North America.

Nigerian hospital workers on strike

2,500 hospital workers walked off the job last Wednesday at the government-owned University of Benin Teaching Hospital (UBTH), in Benin City, Nigeria. They were demanding the removal of the Chief Medical Director Professor A.O. Obasohan.

The president of the National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) UBTH chapter, Dr Nosa Bazuaya, led the action. The strikers cordoned off the entrance to the hospital, turning away patients who arrived for treatment. Their placards bore the slogans: "[Nigerian President] Obasanjo, save us from Obasohan's bad rule," "Workers live in sub-standard house," "No to expired and expensive drugs in UBTH pharmacy," "UBTH workers are tired of oppressive rules" and "Obasohan equals [former dictator General Sani] Abacha."

Dr Bazuaya said, "We have come to see that for the past four years of Prof. Obasohan, as the Chief Medical Director of this hospital, has led us with a dictatorial hand and method of divide and rule. He does not provide free medical treatment for workers since inception. We are the people who deliver health services to the people."

Obasohan has asked resident doctors to sign undertakings that they would not belong to the NARD or any other union, so that they can be used as strike breakers. Similarly with nursing staff, who are paid as casuals.

Dr. Bazuaya said that the workers would go on indefinite strike in the next few days if the federal government refused to remove Obasohan.

The NARD is threatening a national strike if the government fails to accede by September 30 to the terms of an agreement reached in June between the government and doctors over payment of doctors' professional allowances.

Labour Court used to force Namibian supermarket strikers back to work

A strike by over 100 workers at Woermann Brock supermarkets in Windhoek, Namibia, brought the retail chain's outlets to a standstill last weekend. The

employees walked out in protest against a two-week suspension, without pay, imposed on 19 of their colleagues for refusing to carry out stocktaking after normal hours.

The Labour Court issued two interdicts against the Namibia Wholesale and Retail Workers Union (NWRWU) for allegedly inciting an illegal strike. The NWRWU and more than 100 employees at several Woermann Brock branches were charged with contempt of court on Saturday for refusing to obey a Labour Court ruling the day before, which declared their strike illegal.

The court order was defied when the Sheriff's office was allegedly refused entrance to the Ai-Gams Woermann Brock Centre in Klein Windhoek. Woermann Brock's lawyer, Frank Kopplinger, claims that when officials from the Sheriff's office tried to read out the court order, some of the workers prevented them from doing so. The court issued another interdict on Saturday afternoon requesting that the Inspector General of the Police, Lukas Hangula, enforce the order to stop the workers from interfering with Woermann Brock's business.

The Labour Court instructed the police to remove the striking employees from the entrances of Woermann Brock stores and prevent them from "harassing, intimidating, assaulting and threatening to assault" management, suppliers and customers. NWRWU officials were also ordered to give reasons on October 29, why "they should not be imprisoned for contempt of court when they refused to comply with the first court order restraining them from interfering and obstructing the company's business operations." Faced with this official intimidation, all the workers, except the 19 who are still suspended, returned to work on Sunday.



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