Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

4 October 2001

Finnish dockworkers strike against deregulation

On September 25, dockworkers throughout Finland held a two-hour stoppage against a planned European Union "Harbour Directive" deregulating harbour services. The strike was organised by the KTV (the trade union for the Municipal Sector) and the AKT (the Finnish Transport Workers' Union). The AKT has around 3,500 members working on the docks, while the KTV represents 630 harbour workers.

Both unions have stated that the forced competition as a result of the EU directive mean worsening conditions for dockworkers and seamen.

The strike was part of a day of action involving harbour employees across Europe. Dockworkers from some non-EU countries were also scheduled to take part in demonstrations to oppose the directive. The EU Commission's plans are currently being put forward to the European Parliament and to the Council of Ministers.

In Finland, if the directive were implemented it would affect many mainland ports including Helsinki and also Mariehamn and Eckerö in the Åland Islands.

Asko Mäki-Rahkola, chief shop steward at the Port of Helsinki, said, "Shipping companies may well order that the work previously done by stevedoring companies be carried out 'in house', in other words by deck crews or using temporary labour. This would put most of us out of a job, and at the same time the ship owners' employees would scarcely be asked if they have the time to do the work of the stevedores in addition to their own."

Oslo public transport workers strike

Public transport workers in Oslo, Norway, held a strike on September 26, leading to extensive traffic jams and delays for up to 150,000 people who normally use tram and subway services in the capital.

The workers struck in opposition to the city council's plans to reorganise Oslo Sporveier, the tram and subway company, splitting it into five independent entities. Staff fear that this would lead to a worsening of their employment conditions and would detrimentally affect the service to the public.

North Sea helicopter pilots ballot to demand pay rise

Helicopter pilots employed by the North Sea oil company CHC Scotia are to be balloted for strike action in a dispute over pay. Their union, the British Air Line Pilots' Association (Balpa), is demanding pay parity with commercial airline pilots and a new pay structure. The pilots state that they work in very hazardous conditions and that their pay needs to reflect that. A strike by the helicopter pilots would halt staff movements between North Sea oilrigs and the mainland.

The helicopter flight crews are demanding a 40 percent increase for captains and an additional 28 percent for co-pilots, giving them the same salary as the pilots of A320 and Boeing 737 civil aircraft. In August, the crews rejected the latest offer from CHC Scotia.

Balpa officials were this week meeting with other helicopter pilots union representatives in the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands to discuss the possibility of a joint campaign.

While pointing out the gradual erosion in pilots' pay over a 20-year period, Balpa chief negotiator John Moore said, "The future of the whole North Sea oil industry is at stake. Twenty years ago, North Sea helicopter pilots earned about the same as fixed-wing pilots, but are now paid considerably less."

Rail workers in southwest England to be balloted in pay dispute

Rail workers employed by South West Trains in England are to be balloted for strike action in a dispute over pay. The ballot is being organised by the Rail Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) who has rejected a four percent pay offer from the company. The RMT is now set to ballot the 2,000 guards and clerical staff employed by the firm. The union has claimed that drivers have been offered a better pay deal and that "under normal circumstances, four percent would not be an unreasonable offer". SWT has denied this and said that it has offered the RMT the same pay deal for its members as it offered members of the drivers union, Aslef.

The company operates train services between London

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and southern and southwest England, including commuter trains into Waterloo station in London.

Protest held to demand closure of dangerous chemical plant in Toulouse, France

Workers and environmentalist groups held a protest march in the city of Toulouse in southwest France on September 29. They were demanding that potentially hazardous factories be relocated away from residential areas, after a chemical plant blew up in Toulouse last month.

The 15,000-strong demonstration follows the explosion at the AZF chemical plant in the city on September 21, which killed 29 people, injured 2,500 more and damaged some 10,000 nearby homes. Following the blast, 7,000 workers have been made temporarily redundant.

The protesters marched to the AZF plant some 3 kilometres (2 miles) outside the city carrying banners reading "Never again, neither here, nor anywhere else". The march continued on to city hall where they handed in a petition demanding that the plant be permanently shut down.

At this stage the authorities are claiming that the explosion was an accident and have said that a warehouse containing 300 tonnes of ammonium nitrate self-combusted at the factory. Some leading scientists have contradicted this story and said that the chemical involved was a relatively stable product and there was no precedent for such a spontaneous explosion. The city's chief prosecutor has stated that a manslaughter inquiry will be opened; on the basis that criminal negligence could have been behind the explosion.

When the factory was originally built in the 1920s, it was not near any inhabited areas, but the subsequent growth of the city has resulted in populated areas springing up nearby. AZF is the biggest fertiliser producer in France and is owned by TotalFinaElf, the oil conglomerate. Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, recently announced a 230 million euro ($210m) aid package to deal with the aftermath of the disaster.

Angolan teachers on indefinite strike

Teachers throughout Angola's public education system began indefinite strike action on October 1, to support their demand for a salary increase in line with inflation. The strike affects all sectors, including primary, secondary and university education.

According to government statistics, the Angolan rate of inflation for the first half of 2001 was 49.5 percent, which has severely eroded the purchasing power of all workers. Carlinhos Zassala, president of the university teachers' union, said that the strike would continue "until our demands are met".

Industrial action escalates in South Africa

A recent report by the labour consultancy NMG Levy shows a more than three-fold increase in days lost through strike action in South Africa in the first nine months of this year. Days lost increased from 320,000 in 2000 to 900,000 this year. This did not include the two-day national strike called by the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) on August 29 and 30 2001, against the government's privatisation plans. If this action had been included, the figure would have risen to 1.7 million, making it one of the highest since 1994, when the ANC government came to power.

The industries affected include mining, steel and the automotive sectors. In August, auto assembly plants were brought to a standstill by a three-week strike of 21,000 car workers. The same month, 5,000 tyre workers were also on strike for three weeks. Other workers involved in industrial action include those in the electricity sector, platinum mining, engineering and clothing trades.

Joint strike action is currently being threatened by the South African Democratic Teachers (Sadfu) Union and the Professional Educators Union, who are demanding salary increases of between 7.5 and 9.9 percent. Sadfu reports that their members voted by an overwhelming 80 percent in favour of taking strike action. A strike by other public sector workers, including members of the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union, is also imminent. Their dispute is over wages and conditions of employment.

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