

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

18 October 2001

## **Air traffic controllers in Siberia begin hunger strike over new labour law**

On October 10, air-traffic controllers in Omsk, Siberia, began a hunger strike in protest at the proposed new Labour Code and the refusal of employers to raise salaries despite increased profits.

The hunger strike was initially planned for two days and is part of a wider campaign of action in which air-traffic controllers in several towns are playing a leading role, with pickets and stoppages in many workplaces.

Vasily Starostin of the independent union Siberian Confederation of Labour (SKT) said, "officially, striking is prohibited to air dispatchers. On hunger strike they will not be allowed to work by doctors in 2-3 days and thus air traffic in Russia will be stopped."

The new Labour Code passed its preliminary reading in July after the FNPR—the largest trade union confederation in Russia—made a deal with the government agreeing to the changes in return for monopolisation of all union activity.

The Code was originally drawn up by the Primakov government at the behest of the IMF. It enshrines in law the 58-hour week, permits bosses to gather intelligence on the personal lives of workers suspected of union activities, forces pregnant women to work night shifts, and legalises child labour. Under the new Code, independent union activity will be virtually impossible.

Commentators have pointed out that while such violations of workers rights have become commonplace throughout Russia in the last decade, they were at least technically illegal.

## **Serbian trade unions strike against new labour law**

On October 16 a number of Serbian trade unions began a general strike to protest against a new labour law that freezes salaries at state-owned companies. The strike is due to last for one week. The unions involved say that the strike has been well supported. They have also have called for demonstrations to be held on October 17 as part of the campaign. Other unions, including those representing health care workers and public transport staff, have stated that they will join the action later in the week.

The unions are calling on the government to withdraw the labour law from the statute book.

## **French transport workers strike**

French bus, metro and rail workers held a one-day strike on October 16 in several cities in pursuit of a number of demands, including wage increases, job security and the right to retire at age 55 instead of 60.

Workers at the state rail company SNCF forced the cancellation of more than half the Eurostar trains to London and the Thalys to Brussels services. Also severely disrupted were the TGV high-speed trains between Paris and Lille. The regional RER train linking Paris to the suburban areas of the city were barely running as a result of the strike, while the city's Metro service was not affected by the dispute.

Other cities affected by the action were Marseille, France's second largest city, and in the southeast, Lyon, where bus traffic was virtually halted. Bus and rail services were hit in Lille, Bordeaux and several other

cities.

## **Paris workers at tourist attractions strike over 35-hour week law**

Workers at a number of the most prestigious galleries, museums and other attractions in the French capital struck over the weekend of October 13 in a long-standing dispute over the imposition of the 35-hour week in their industry.

The strike forced the closure of the Pompidou Centre, the Musée d'Orsay, Notre Dame Cathedral, the Arc de Triomphe and the Pantheon. The Louvre museum remained open and entry was free because there were too few workers to staff the cash desks.

The galleries and museums are state-owned. As part of the 35-hour week legislation workers in the galleries and museums were granted extra leave to keep their work time down to 35 hours. However due to the fact that no extra staff have been hired to replace them when they take their leave, they have not been able to take the necessary days off.

In another dispute, workers at French hospitals working in non-emergency areas took strike action on October 11 to demand an extra 3,000 staff as a result of the 35-hour week legislation.

## **British coal miners continue strike after one day return to work**

Coal miners employed at the Rossington colliery in South Yorkshire returned to work for just one day on October 11, before going back on strike. The members of the National Union of Mineworkers have been involved in industrial action since August 15 over the amount of coal they need to produce in order to qualify for bonus payments. Since that date the pit has not produced any coal. The miners state that bonus payments can account for up to a third of their wages and that the company target of 21,500 tonnes of coal is too high.

The miners returned to work for one day in order to take advantage of employment legislation introduced by the Labour government, which stipulates that a striking workforce is protected against dismissal for eight weeks. But this is unlikely to offer any real protection.

## **Israeli investment company in severance pay dispute**

An investment company called 3I - which owns Phoenicia Glassworks in Yeruham, in Israel is currently engaged in a dispute with its staff after refusing to pay severance pay of 200 percent agreed between employees and the factory's previous owners. 3I is offering the workers just 120 percent.

After a meeting last week between the management of the company, the Histadrut labour federation chairman Amir Peretz and the director general of the Ministry of Industry and Trade, Amir Haik, it was revealed that 3I was aware of the severance pay agreement. The agreement is valid until September 2003, when it purchased Phoenicia two years ago. The Ministry of Industry and Trade declared that 3I had even agreed to uphold the agreement.

The factory - which manufactures glass bottles - is now closed but a 3I CEO, Esther Eldan said the company is keeping the factory's kiln running, although at a temperature of 1000 degrees Celsius instead of the 1400 degrees Celsius used during regular work. "When we see that we have reached the point of no return, we will shut the kiln down, but I hope

that doesn't happen," said Eldan.

3I has repeatedly refused to declare whether it plans to reopen the factory. Haik revealed that 3I had asked for government aid to finance the severance pay package, but said that his ministry was not prepared to finance redundancies.

Phoenicia is believed to have run into serious trouble after the Palestinian intifada that led to a drastic cut in orders. In August 3I announced a restructuring plan that included laying off 42 of Phoenicia's 230 employees. After Phoenicia's employees rejected the plan 3I shut down the factory and has now begun importing bottles for its major clients.

#### **Lebanese municipality workers protest salary delay**

Dozens of municipality workers in Tripoli, Lebanon gathered at the municipality building last Friday to protest the delay in paying salaries for the third consecutive month. The Municipality Workers Association issued a statement attacking the finance and municipalities ministries and blaming them for the deteriorating situation of the workers. "We will keep our strike open until the salaries are paid and the accumulating debts restructured," it warned. The union called on Tripoli's mayor to establish a committee to ensure the implementation of the 40 percent increase for end-of-services benefits and for medical services.

#### **Lebanon: Ogero workers stage sit-in to protest restructuring**

Employees at Ogero, the telephone repair and maintenance company, staged a sit-in on Saturday in their offices to protest anticipated lay-off and compensation schemes once the company is privatised.

A new company, Liban Telecom, is poised to take over Ogero, whose employees make up 1,470 of the 4,300 employed by the Ministry of Post and telecommunications. They are worried that Article 50 of the Telecoms Law will not give them the compensation they hope for. The law gives Liban Telecom the right to choose how many Ogero employees it will take on.

Ogero employees want guarantees that they would all be offered employment by Liban Telecom, or receive bigger incentives and end-of-service indemnities.

#### **South African Unions back down over strike action**

Public sector unions in South Africa have backed down from a confrontation with the ANC-led government in the latest round of pay negotiations. Although a recent two-day strike against privatisation received massive support, union leaders are now signaling their preparedness to accept the government's "restructuring" measures.

Whilst the latest dispute was nominally over pay, the deal included clauses relating to the job losses that will result from selling off the public sector. An estimated 50,000 to 100,000 jobs are under threat. The unions have now accepted below-inflation pay increases—8 percent for low paid workers and 6.5 percent for higher paid workers—along with minor amendments to the offending clauses.

Negotiations between the unions and the government broke down last week with the Public Service and Administration Minister, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, withdrawing the government offer and reverting to an original proposal of a five percent pay rise.

Whilst the union leaders have accepted privatisation in principle, they objected to a clause on the imposition of arbitration which they presented as a restriction of the right to take strike action. They now claim the pay deal is acceptable because it has been amended. As Cosatu, the main union federation explained in its press release, "It reaffirmed the Public Service Job Summit agreements and in that context labour's right to use any legal tactics, including strike action, if disputes arise about restructuring."

Eight out of the 12 public sector unions have now accepted the government's offer. Four unions are affiliated to the Federation of Unions of South Africa (Fedusa), representing 36 percent of public servants, and two others are not affiliated to Cosatu or Fedusa—the National Professional

Teachers Association and the SA Police Union.

Only two Cosatu-affiliated unions have agreed to the offer—the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) and the Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa. However leaders of the key SA Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu) said they would not be taking strike action and would be meeting next week to discuss acceptance. The other Cosatu affiliate, the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union, is also likely to accept.

Despite the government's attempts to blame "ideologues" and "ultra-leftists" in the union bureaucracy for hampering the negotiations, there was widespread recognition that the main impediment to a friendly settlement was the enormous opposition in the working class. In the ballot by Sadtu, for example, close to 80 percent of those voting supported strike action.

Attracting more investment into South Africa by means of privatisation and assuring investors that it can keep the working class under control is central to the ANC government's strategy. In a speech made when the negotiations with the unions had broken down, the minister of trade and industry, Alec Erwin, warned against the dangers of perceived "economic mismanagement". "In a short period in Zimbabwe, the industrial capacity has been destroyed. It would be very dangerous in South Africa."

The South African government hired BusinessMap, an investor strategy consultancy, to produce a report on the prospects for privatising and restructuring the public sector. The report blames poor market conditions for having brought South Africa's privatisation programme to a halt this year, but proposes making up for lost time by selling off three of the top state-owned enterprises—Eskom, Telkom and Transnet, for R175 billion. These represent 77 percent of all state enterprises. The state currently owns enterprises worth R200 billion (£14.5bn) employing about 300,000 people. According to the Communication Workers' Union, 17,000 jobs have already been lost due to restructuring in Telkom.

#### **Private sector strikes in South Africa**

5,000 workers at Samancor limited, a subsidiary of the BHP Billiton group, are taking indefinite strike action over a pay dispute. Their union, Numsa, is demanding a rise of 15 percent, a two-year agreement and an end to retrenchments and outsourcing. Their demand is based on a study conducted by the union showing that wages of a majority of the chrome, steel and engineering workers suffered a 30 percent decline in real terms over the last three years.

The company responded by offering a 5.5 percent rise and locking out the workers before the strike started. Police were called in an attempt to break the strike.

About 2,000 workers have gone on strike at the S.A Metal company in Cape Town. Union demands are for a 12 percent pay rise, a contribution to a medical scheme and a guaranteed end of year bonus. The company has offered a pay rise of only a 7.5 percent.

#### **Council workers demonstrate at Mombasa, Kenya**

Local authority workers in Mombasa took to the streets over the failure of the Municipal Council to pay their September salary. They pelted the town hall with stones and riot police were called and fired shots into the air. The Town Clerk promised that salaries would be paid later this week, but the workers accused councillors of misuse of funds and chanted "no money, no work." The workers had only returned to work two weeks ago after previous strike action.

#### **Health service strike in Malawi**

A strike by 500 junior medical workers at Malawi's Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital in Blantyre has virtually closed the 1,000 bed hospital that serves a large part of the country's population. Health authorities have begun moving patients to a private facility. The workers are striking over the government's failure to pay agreed salary increases to its public sector work force. Their present salary is just US\$40 a month and the allowances they are demanding, backdated to July, would bring their pay

up to about US\$77 a month

### **Striking workers whipped by Lesotho police**

Clothing workers demonstrating in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, were attacked by police on Monday this week. The police used tear gas and sjamboks (whips) to break up the crowd. Several protestors were injured, including a pregnant woman who had to be taken to the hospital.

The protesters, on strike over wages and working conditions, were attempting to stop some workers returning to work. They presented a petition to the prime minister's office over the "serious plight" of workers in the clothing industry as a result of very low wages and "slavery working conditions." Minimum wage in the industry is R502 per month (US\$54) and the unions had been offered a 6.5 percent increase that was rejected.



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