

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

25 October 2001

Glasgow underground workers take unofficial strike action

On October 18, staff from Glasgow's underground train system walked off the job in an unofficial strike following the breakdown of ticket dispensers.

The strike took place just hours before a major European football match was due to kick off. Football supporters travelling to Rangers' Ibrox stadium in Glasgow for the European UEFA cup match against Moscow Dynamo were held up by the action, resulting in the match kicking off late.

The strike involved some 40 staff at Glasgow's 15 underground stations, and began when ticket machines became faulty in one of the stations and staff had to issue tickets manually. The unions insist that there is an agreement that no-one has to manually dispense tickets for more than two hours.

Britain: river pilots vote to strike to defend jobs and safety

Earlier this week, it was announced that river pilots working at some of England's busiest ports had voted to take strike action, in a dispute over their safety conditions and employment contracts. The pilots are based at ports on the River Humber, and some 130 voted by a large majority in favour of the action. They are members of a co-operative that is affiliated to the Transport and General Workers Union.

The workers are in dispute with Associated British Ports (ABP). The dispute arose following ABP's request that they re-apply for their own jobs, to force the renegotiation of their current contracts. ABP is to employ its own pilots from January 2002.

None of the pilots took up this proposal. The ABP has condemned the vote for industrial action as "unlawful" and stated that may take the dispute to the High Court.

The Humber pilots are self-employed, and plan to take strike action next month, which would disrupt a number of ports, including Grimsby and Immingham. The strike could have widespread economic impact as some 24,000 vessels navigate the Humber each year.

One of the pilots, Captain Steve Holland, said that the dispute was an issue of "public concern".

"If we do nothing, two things are going to happen. Pilots who have dedicated themselves for decades to providing a safe and efficient pilot service are going to be out of a job. More importantly than that the Humber is in danger. ABP's plans to recruit worldwide and train an alternative pilot service in the limited time available, we think, is fraught with danger."

Rail workers in France strike

Staff employed by the state-run SNCF railway continued their

strike action last week, resulting in a number of delayed and cancelled services. The strike began on October 16 and affected the high-speed Paris to London Eurostar service. The strike led to cancellations of a number of Eurostar trains. On October 17, the Paris to London service was cancelled on three occasions.

The strike is part of a national campaign by SNCF staff for wage increases, greater job security and the right to retire at 55. It has forced the cancellation of more than half the Eurostar trains to London and the Thalys service to Brussels. TGV high-speed trains between Paris and Lille have also been severely disrupted by the dispute.

Strike action halts ships at Israeli ports

Israeli port workers took industrial action last week, leading to the stoppage of 20 ships at Ashdod port. A further six ships were left waiting to unload their cargo at Haifa port, according to Eitan Rapaport, president of the Shipping Association.

The trade union association Histadrut's Haifa branch spokeswoman said that output at the ports was "lower than usual" owing to the lack of an agreement with the Ports Authority over expected changes in their management structure. The union body accepts that each port will operate as an autonomous business unit.

Rapaport has called on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to broker an agreement between the port workers and the Ports Authority. He said that trade in and out of Israel has suffered recently and that sanctions at the ports have aggravated the situation, causing a great deal of damage.

War on African workers' rights extended by Billiton BHP

Billiton BHP—the Australian-based multinational company which sacked 700 workers at its Mozal plant in Mozambique when they went on strike earlier this month—has now extended its attacks to workers at Samancor in South Africa.

BHP Billiton subsidiary Samancor, the world's largest ferro-alloy maker, locked out 5,000 striking workers at Witbank and Middelburg. Members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) at these plants had been on strike for seven days when the lockout occurred. The workers are demanding a two-year settlement and a pay increase of 15 percent across the board. They are also demanding a moratorium on retrenchments and outsourcing, and an end to the deterioration of conditions of employment. Management has responded with an offer of 5.5 percent.

On Monday, 3,000 Numsa members at three other BHP Billiton plants—at Hillside (Richard Bay), Alusaf Bayside (Richards Bay) and Samancor (Meyerton)—began strike action in support of the

locked-out workers at Witbank and Middelburg. The action has already cut Samancor's output of ferrochrome, a stainless steel ingredient, by 5 percent.

BHP Billiton is the world's largest resources company. Of the \$2.6 billion of projects BHP Billiton has under construction, about \$1 billion will be spent on three big oil and gas projects and the rest on three major mining expansions at the Escondida copper complex in Chile, the Mozal aluminium smelter in Mozambique and the Mount Arthur coal operations in Australia. BHP Billiton's Deputy Chief Executive Brian Gilbertson received \$2.12 million in executive fees for 2001. This is 633 times the annual wage of \$3,348 that Mozal workers were earning prior to the strike.

In Mozambique, Mozal management had earlier concluded a no-strike deal with the SINTIME union, which is affiliated to the International Metalworkers' Federation, as a condition for recognising them. When SINTIME sought to negotiate an increase in wages and other benefits, the company refused their demands and even refused to discuss them.

During the strike at Mozal, production was maintained through the use of 130 local strike breakers, with 70 other scabs being transferred from company plants at Hillside and Bayside in South Africa, who were paid in US dollars and each received \$500 malaria allowance.

There is little doubt that BHP Billiton's use of South African employees to break the strike in Mozambique must have angered other workers and encouraged them to take sympathetic action in support of their colleagues at the Samacor plant.

On October 19, when the Mozal SINTIME representatives met with the minister of labour and minister of industry and business, they were told that if the workers wanted to be re-employed at the smelter they would have to face disciplinary procedures. The combined intimidation from the company and government resulted in half of the striking workers returning to the plant.

During the disciplinary hearings, these workers are being pressured to sign a statement declaring that they "observed an illegal strike". Meanwhile, the International Metalworkers' Federation has confined itself to writing letters of protest to the president of Mozambique, Joaquim Chissano, and other top government officials, and to Billiton management.

In addition sacking the strikers at Mozal and locking-out the striking Samancor workers, BHP Billiton has also recently suspended two Numsa shop stewards at the Hillside Smelter Company, in Richards Bay. Almost 1,000 workers there have been organising lunchtime demonstrations in support of the dismissed strikers at Mozal.

Nigerian petroleum workers strike

Workers in Nigeria's petroleum sector began a nationwide strike last Saturday, to further their demand for a better welfare package. Members of the National Union of Petroleum and Gas (NUPENG) working for independent fuel-marketing firms have stopped procuring products from five depots across the country, including those of Apapa, Port Harcourt, Benin, Kano and Kaduna. NUPENG issued a statement saying that the strike was to force fuel-marketing firms to honour a previous agreement on pay rises and welfare. In addition to welfare issues, NUPENG members are protesting the alleged assault of a female union member by an

expatriate director of a Port Harcourt-based oil company.

Thousands of commuters were stranded in Nigeria's commercial capital Lagos on Monday due to fuel truck drivers' involvement in the strike. The few buses available doubled their fares in anticipation of the fuel shortages the NUPENG action might cause. Meanwhile, long queues have also started at fuel service stations in the city.

The unions had suspended a strike earlier this year following the intervention of the NNPC Group Managing Director, Mr. Jackson Gaius-Obaseki.

Obaseki's reaction to the strike this time was to appeal to the workers to resume the procurement of petroleum products in the interest of consumers, and to "show restraint". There are about 3,200 independent marketing companies spread mostly in rural areas of the country, while members of NUPENG distribute petroleum products to virtually all parts of the country.

Tobacco workers on strike in Kenya

Workers at the British American Tobacco Thika processing plant went on strike last week, in protest at new terms of service, which reduced them to the status of casual labourers.

The chairman of the Thika Kenya Union of Commercial Food and Allied Workers, Daniel Kyule, said the management were targeting 650 workers who were recently joined the union. He accused the company of victimising employees for joining a union of their choice.

Teachers strike against non-payment in Sierra Leone

Teachers belonging to the Technical and Vocational Institutions in Bo, Sierra Leone, took strike action on Monday last week, after surviving for nine months without any salary from the government.

Students were sent home by their teachers, and told not to come back until further notice. Teachers told reporters that they would not return to their classrooms until they received their unpaid salaries.



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