

# Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

1 November 2001

## **Staff at Paris Louvre end strike**

On October 27 staff at the Louvre Museum in Paris, France ended their eight days strike over working practises. Louvre workers have been involved in a dispute over the implementation of a 35-hour week in the museums and other tourist attractions since March.

The strike was ended by the trade unions involved after a Paris court ruled on October 26 that it was unauthorised and stated that the government could remove striking workers from the entrance to the museum. The injunction granted the Louvre management the right to ask police to do the job of the strikers if they did not comply with the ruling.

The museums and tourist attraction workers are demanding that extra staff be hired so that they can claim their legally entitled extra holiday periods under new 35 hour week legislation. Other tourist attractions affected have included the Arc de Triomphe and Notre Dame cathedral. These have either been closed by the dispute or on occasion have been free of charge due to a lack of ticket booths. Since March some 430,000 visitors have not been able to visit the Louvre. The museum has lost an estimated 15 million francs (\$2 million) in income.

## **Gas workers in England to strike over pay**

Gas workers employed by Transco are set to take strike action next week in a dispute over pay. The strikes will be held from November 5 and will be followed by more stoppages in the run-up to Christmas. Workers are set to strike in parts of London, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Essex and Hertfordshire. They are members of the GMB union.

Gas workers at Transco voted heavily in favour of industrial action in protest at the level of allowances paid to workers in the London area. The GMB is currently in talks with Transco in an attempt to avert industrial action. Union official Ed Blisset said, "The gas industry is suffering from staff retention and recruitment problems, and the cost of living in the

capital and home counties is one of the main reasons for the staff shortages".

## **Benefits workers strike in England over job safety**

Benefits and jobcentre staff in England struck on October 25 to protest at plans to remove security screens from offices across the UK. The strikers work in state run centres where unemployed people look for jobs and claim social security benefits. The screens are in place to prevent possible assaults or intimidation. The striking staff are members of the Public and Commercial Services union, who have reported that attacks on Benefits Agency staff have doubled to more than 5,000 in the last year.

An official of the union Eddie Spence said, "Our members are there to serve the public and generally do so without any problems, but a small minority of people can react violently to decisions they don't like". The strike has been targeted at a number of jobcentre and benefits offices but the union has said it may ballot all its members at every jobcentre and benefits office if the dispute is not resolved.

## **South African Labour Court moves to prevent strike**

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) has postponed a secondary strike by 14,000 employees at BHP Billiton plants in the country. The action was to have been in support of the strike of fellow workers at Samancor, Witbank and Middelburg which has been going on for four weeks. The primary dispute is over a demand for a 15 percent across the board wage increase and in opposition to BHP's intention to "do away with benefits and medical aid".

The South African Labour Court had ruled in favour of Numsa, after the employers had claimed the action would be illegal because aluminium and chrome were not "customers or suppliers to one another", even though all the workers involved are employed by the same company. Despite claims of "victory" by the union and declarations that "the battle lines are drawn",

the sympathy strike was called off to allow a management appeal to go ahead. No date has been set for the appeal.

### **Strike at Air Afrique to demand payment of arrears**

Workers with the African multinational airline, Air Afrique, began an indefinite strike this week to demand payment of salary arrears. It is only a few months since West African leaders, including the president of Senegal, along with the French government were drafting a plan to keep the airline in business by handing the biggest part of the airline's shares to Air France. But when the US authorities banned Air Afrique from flying to New York for over two weeks after the attacks in New York and Washington, this cost the company more than a million dollars in revenue, and put its future in doubt. The airline was forced to give up half of its fleet last month—two Airbus and two Boeing 737 aircraft.

The company now owes its employee's three months' wages, and is trying to negotiate to delay payment of half of the total. The workers are determined to get the full amount immediately. The company's pension and social security contributions have also not been paid for three months.

The strike, which began on October 20, has brought Air Afrique to a standstill. Five days later, the union called for the urgent implementation of the deal concluded with the French government to keep the company afloat. The deal would keep a portion of the share capital in the hands of Air Afrique staff and West African governments, but would leave the largest stake in the hands of Air France, making it the biggest single shareholder. Air France has its own difficulties following the September 11 attacks, and may not be able to rescue Air Afrique.

### **Nigerian local government workers strike**

A nationwide strike of local government workers, beginning October 26, has been called by the Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) in support of their demand for payment of N7.7 billion accumulated salary arrears. The union president, Deji Akinwalere, told reporters in Abuja that the workers are owed salaries ranging from two to 21 months.

Employees of the Borno State government have already been on strike over the same issues for two weeks and were suspended by the authorities for

refusing to end the strike. The Borno State government has invited "graduate employment seekers" to apply for positions in the civil service.



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