Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

29 November 2001

French dockworkers continue strike action

Dockworkers employed at the southern port of Marseille are continuing their strike to demand better pay and working conditions. The dockers are also demanding the right to retire at 50 and that extra safety measures be introduced as they are exposed to dangerous cargoes.

The strike began on November 13 and has cost firms that use the port, the largest in France, hundreds of thousands of dollars. Tankers carrying oil have not been able to dock, and this has resulted in nearby oil refineries being unable to take deliveries of oil.

Such is the impact of the strike that a national mediator for the dispute has been appointed by the Ministry of Transport.

French riot police break up picket line and end mint workers strike

On November 26, French riot police broke through a picket line at a mint producing the new euro coins in Pessac, near Bordeaux.

The workers had been on strike for 10 days in a dispute over pay and conditions when 10 busses containing riot squad police broke through their 300-strong picket line at the mint.

The picket line had been stopping delivery trucks entering and leaving the mint during the strike, preventing euro coins being produced. The mint was the only one in the country producing euro coins, which becomes the sole currency in 12 European Union countries in February 2002.

The police proceeded to take control of the plant, taking away the master stamps used for pressing the coins. One press agency reported that 50 to 60 workers remained in the plant following the riot police operation. The mint employs 900 workers, and normally produces between 10 million and 12 million coins each day.

Following the break-up of the picket lines, the trade unions involved in the dispute refused to condemn the police action and instead reported that there was no violence. Jean-Louis Naudet, a leader of the Federation of State Workers merely said of the Finance Minister, Laurent Fabius, “Fabius chose the CRS [riot police] rather than negotiation”.

In another operation, police also confiscated stamps used to produce euros at the Hôtel des Monnaies mint in Paris.

Italian trade unions call two-hour general strike in dispute over labour law changes

On November 26, three of Italy’s main trade unions called a two-hour national strike to be held at the beginning of December.

The strike will be held to protest the introduction of new labour laws by the government of media magnate Silvio Berlusconi. The government is planning to introduce new measures that will make it easier for employers to make workers redundant.

The new laws will grant ministers the right to implement a range of labour market changes and given them powers to amend Italy’s “workers’ statute” for the first time since its introduction in 1970.

It is expected that far more “flexibility” of workers employment rights and conditions will be introduced. Measures that are planned as part of these changes include the introduction of private sector job centres, and a new “welfare-to-work” system based on that in the UK. Changes are also expected to be made to laws covering part-time employees.

The three unions involved in calling the strike—the CGIL, CISL and UIL—held talks with Berlusconi on November 25 but they were unable to reach a settlement, prompting the call for strike action. It had been expected that the strike would have been of a longer duration; government officials said that this might be because the unions were not united in their reaction to the breakdown of the negotiations.

The CGIL public sector union was on prior record supporting a longer general strike, while the other two unions were opposed to such action.

One of the main changes to employment legislation that the government wishes to make is the abolishment of “Article 18”. Under this clause, a court can order a company with more than 15 workers to reinstate an employee to his or her job if the worker is found to have been unfairly dismissed.

Benefit workers take industrial action in north-west England

On November 26, civil servants at a benefits processing centre in Ashton-in-Makerfield, Greater Manchester began strike action after being forced to cover duties normally dealt with by staff in Balham, south London.

The staff in Balham are involved in a national dispute to prevent the removal of security screens at benefit offices nationally.

The staff in Ashton-in-Makerfield are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union and have voted to strike over a three-week period. It is estimated that more than 100,000 benefits claimants in south-west and south-east London are likely to receive a delayed service as a result of the action.

A spokesman for the strikers said, “The work of Balham staff was given to our union members. They were told to do it or be sacked. A bit of a precedent has been set here. Never before in the history of the civil service have workers been forced to do strikebreaking work. Hopefully, it won’t mean people don’t get paid but, inevitably, there is going to be delay and disruption to benefits in London.

“At the moment, this is a three-week strike, and we hope to reach a settlement before then. If not, we will have no choice but to escalate, and that escalation could include pensions and incapacity benefit workers.”

Court moves against striking dockers and automotive workers in South Africa

Employers have obtained a court against to stop picketing by striking dockers. The National Ports Authority of South Africa, the Stevedore Association and the labour broking company TMS Ilanga yesterday obtained an interim order in the labour court against the Service Employees’ Industrial Union. It prevents them from “intimidating or preventing colleagues from working”. Tony Kruger, chairman of the Association of Durban Stevedores, said that the companies involved had been “severely affected” by the strike.

The strike stems from a dispute over the abolition of the national dock labour scheme, and had been referred to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA).

Union spokesman and strike leader Willie Cirah said the strikers want an end to the current system of using labour brokers, and a return to the national dock labour scheme, which was disbanded in March. This scheme gave preference to a registered pool of dock workers when there were jobs available. Cirah denounced the harbour employers’ use of fly-by-night labour brokers with “no interest in improving the conditions of employment”.

Also in South Africa 2,500 workers at the automotive parts and service distributor Midas, which is also part of the Dorbyl group, are on strike for higher wages. Another 15,000 workers are now threatening to come out on a sympathy strike.

Dumisa Ntuli, a spokesperson for the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), said: “It is not our intention to call for extended solidarity action but, based on the company’s arrogance in calling in the police, we now see a great need to intensify the action.”

Ntuli said the Midas workers had been striking legally since November 13, with workers demanding an 8 percent across-the-board increase, while the company was offering “a miserable 6.5 percent”.

The company has now obtained an injunction in the Johannesburg high court to prevent strikers from picketing outside demarcated areas.

Nigerian government tries to use immunisation scheme to end strike

The Nigerian government is trying to pressure council workers to suspend their strike over salary arrears, claiming that they will cause epidemics amongst children by not participating in the National Immunisation Programme (NIP).

National Union for Local Government Employees (NULGE) chairman Dr. Deji Akinwalere said that his members would not take part in the immunisation exercise unless the salary arrears were paid. The council workers are owed arrears ranging from 21 to two months pay, totalling $74.8 million, by councils throughout the country. “To expect a council official owed for 21 months to continue to dispense his services even if he will starve to death in the process, is the highest expression of man’s inhumanity to man. There is no economic terrorism or state tyranny that can be greater than what our members are experiencing”, he stressed.

NULGE said the federal government should be held responsible and liable for infant deaths caused by the spread of killer diseases like tetanus, tuberculosis, measles, diphtheria and whooping cough.