Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

9 May 2002

German engineers and electrical workers union continues strike action

Members of the IG Metall trade union in Germany have stepped up their campaign this week demanding a pay increase. On May 6, workers employed by DaimlerChrysler took strike action. Some 2,000 workers at the auto company's Sindelfingen plant took part.

Many other factories in the southern state of Baden-Wuerttemberg were also hit by strikes. Workers also held strikes at tractor maker John Deere's Mannheim plant as well as at Porsche and Audi. The union issued a statement that said picket lines were established outside some 20 plants and that by noon, 30,000 workers from night and early shifts had joined the action. The union added that 25,000 workers at another 50 firms would take further strike action this week.

The union is targeting DaimlerChrysler plants in Sindelfingen and Stuttgart; Porsche in Stuttgart; and Audi in Neckarsulm. It nevertheless made it clear that it intends to disrupt production but not to lead to plants closing for indefinite periods. Berthold Huber, the union's regional head, said of this policy, "Our strike concept is so responsibly put together that through these flexible strikes, no jobs will be endangered, but nonetheless the necessary pressure will be exerted on the employers in order to get a fair result at the bargaining table."

Negotiations between employers and the IG Metall broke up on April 19 after the union rejected the employers' offer of a 3.3 percent increase for 15 months. IG Metall originally called for a 6.5 percent increase as part of a one-year deal.

At Porsche, the management said that the cost in terms of lost sales was 10 million euros and a spokesman said that this would be restored by the firm increasing production over the next few weeks. "A one-day strike is not a problem for us," he said.

Council workers in London to strike

Council workers in London are to hold a one-day strike on May 14. The workers are members of the public service union UNISON and are demanding an increase of their "London weighting" allowance to help cover the cost of working in the capital. UNISON is calling for the allowance to be increased to £4,000 a year. The allowance is currently paid at levels of between £1,400 and £2,600.

Around 60,000 members of the union who work for the 32 London borough councils voted in favour of the stoppage by a margin of around seven to one.

French medical practitioners strike continues

The ongoing dispute between medical practitioners and the French government continued last week when the CSMF and SML trade unions called on their members to close their practices again from May 7 until May 13. The doctors are demanding that the government increase the consultation fees that they are paid for visits of patients.

The dispute has now lasted six months beginning with strikes at night shifts, then strikes at weekend shifts, further protests at Christmas and New Year, two day strikes without doctors commencing on January 23 and February 15, a weekend without doctors in February, and a large national demonstration in Paris on March 10. Additional strikes were held over the Easter period and another last week.

On May 7 the president of the medical trade union MG France, Pierre Costes, called on the new prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, to set a deadline to meet the doctors' demand of an increase in fees to 20 euros for one consultation and 30 euros for one home visit. On January 24 the same trade union had agreed with the previous Jospin government to a rise of only one euro to 18.50 euros. This had been declared as obligatory for all practitioners by the government and had resulted in the dispute being intensified.

French foundry workers continue strike action over pay and conditions

Workers at a foundry in the town of Poitou in France met on April 29 and voted to continue the strike they began on April 23. The workers are employed by the Teksid-group. The industrial action began as a result of the management attempting to undermine working conditions and wages by introducing part time jobs and blocking pay increases under the pretext of introducing the 35-hour week. The workers are members of the CGT, CFDT, FO and UDT (Autonomes) trade unions.

The workers are supporting a demand for a 150 euro a month increase in wages, while management are offering an increase in pay of just 1.2 percent from April, a further 0.5 percent in September and a one-off payment of 3,700 francs.

Israeli unions protest social cost of war

Trade unions across Israel are threatening to call a general strike in opposition to the government's plans to make working families pay for the recent military offensive in the West Bank. After the Sharon government released its recent budget, which called for an 18-month national wage freeze, the cutting of a whole range of social welfare benefits and the raising of taxes, the Histadrut trade union body gave legal notice that a general strike will be called within a fortnight.

The Histadrut chairman, Amir Peretz, who sits in the government, described the proposals as the Sharon government opening up a new war-front to "fight against its citizens." ICFTU General Secretary, Guy Ryder, just returning from Jenin, said, "war is no justification for the removal of workers rights. The ICFTU fully supports the Histadrut decision to end the freeze in labour disputes. They have acted responsibly at a time of national crisis, and have been exploited in return." Warning the cabinet of an impending labour crisis, Peretz said the proposed plan would "destroy the infrastructure of discourse between the workers and the state."

The Finance Minister, Silvan Shalom, said he hoped the Histadrut would come to terms with the severity of the "nation's economic and security problems", pledging that the workers would receive tax cuts in 18 months time.

Since the recent Intifada began, in September 2000, the economy of Israel has been stagnating. Key sectors such as tourism have seen a near collapse and unemployment has risen sharply among both Israelis and Palestinians. Miftah, the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, estimates that some 257,000 Palestinians are unemployed due to the border closures—with 64 percent of the community living below the poverty line.

The construction industry in Israel was dominated by Palestinian workers from the Palestinian Authority territory, while more than 10 percent of the workers in the Israeli tourism, agriculture, manufacturing and mining industry came from the Gaza Strip or the West Bank.

The threat of a general strike comes just as the Histadrut leadership is facing elections scheduled for mid-June. Commentators have hinted that the latest statements by the Histadrut leadership are little more than an election ploy to cover for its collaboration with Sharon's war.

Israeli pilots threaten strike action

The National Pilots Union are planning industrial action in protest at plans by the Israeli airline, Israir, to use foreign pilots on its new charter route to the United States.

Histadrut and the pilots union said the move by Israir could lead to the loss of jobs for Israeli pilots and for up to 500 El Al ground crew.

Zimbabwean textile workers protest ill treatment

Textile workers at Modzone Enterprises in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe have initiated a protest against the ill treatment that they receive from their employers.

The company is run on the basis of an agreement between the governments of Zimbabwe and Iran. Workers say that their Iranian employers abuse them, and then threaten them with disciplinary action whenever they complain. One worker said, "We have not had any peace with our employers. They ill-treat us but we work for a company directly linked to the government."

A memorandum sent by the dye house manager threatened to discipline any worker who disobeyed the order to "cease forthwith to sit at their respective machines".

Managing director, Hassan Jafari, accused the workers of being "idle" and "pampered". He said if the workers sat at their weaving machines, "they will be sabotaging the company, the country and their own national asset." He denied workers' allegations of dictatorship and abuse.

Ugandan dam operators on sit-down strike

Over 200 workers, responsible for operating the Nalubaale Dam and Kiira Power Dam in Uganda, have been on an indefinite sit-down strike over pay since May 2. The Uganda Electricity Generation Company (UEGC) owns both dams. The company was formed when the original Uganda Electricity Board (UEB) was broken up in March last year into three separate businesses, responsible for generation, distribution and transmission, to pave the way for privatisation.

The workers at UEGC are demanding parity with workers at the Uganda Electricity Transmission Company (UETC), who received a 20 percent pay increase earlier this year. They are also demanding that their terminal benefits be paid with interest from April 2001, the date when they stopped working for UEB.

The strike has brought a halt to the electrical and mechanical maintenance and civil engineering sections of the dams, leaving only three sections still in operation. The workers also threaten to withdraw from these sections unless management responded to their demands.

Eskom Enterprises Pty of South Africa and Union Fenosa International of Spain are in competition to acquire ownership of UEGC. The UEGC board chairman, Tikodri Togboa, said, "Our hands have been tied by the guidelines of the Utility Reform Unit. We were restrained from giving workers any salary increment during the period the company would undergo the privatisation exercise."

Zimbabwean gold miners strike against non-payment

Over 800 workers at the Sabi Gold Mine in Zvishavane, Zimbabwe went on strike last week to protest against the non-payment of their salaries for the last three months. The workers are refusing to go back to work until all outstanding salary payments have been made. They are also demanding an improvement in their working conditions.

The mine, a subsidiary of the government-controlled Zimbabwe Mining Development Corporation (ZMDC), has suffered financial difficulties since last year, despite having been one of the country's largest gold producers. The ZMDC "parastatal" (government-owned national company) bought the Sabi mine from a company based in South Africa, in 1984.

Last year workers alleged the company was diverting their pension contributions towards meeting its operational costs.