

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

23 May 2002

## **Irish postal workers balloted for strike action**

Postal workers in Ireland are set to vote for strike action in a ballot to be concluded this week. The dispute centres on clerical staff wages and negotiations are currently being held with the Irish postal service based on a formula of “pay for change”. The Communications Workers’ Union is balloting all its members, including postal delivery workers as part of its campaign. Although there are less than 1,000 clerical workers, all 8,000 of the union’s members are being balloted.

The company states that they have offered the clerks a pay increase of 9.5 percent and a share option deal as well. The CWU disputes this claim and states that the supposed pay increase is simply an allowance. The union’s national officer, Sean McDonagh, said, “The first four per cent would be payable this year and another 5.5 percent over the next two years. Although paid weekly, the allowances will not be reckonable for pensions, holiday pay or sick pay.”

## **French newspaper staff strike**

On May 16, journalists at the *La Tribune* newspaper in France took strike action for 24 hours. As a result of the action, the daily financial paper did not appear. The journalists are in dispute with the newspaper over the uncertainty of their employment contracts. The 118 journalists of the editorial staff are members of the SNJ and CFTC trade unions and voted by a majority of 84 percent to support industrial action.

The newspaper is currently organising a restructuring programme to cut costs. Last year its circulation fell by 3.7 percent. There are reports that *La Tribune* will stop the publication of certain of its pages that report about the economic life of French regions. The journalists fear that such action would lead to the dismissal of reporters.

## **Italian rail workers strike over pay and conditions**

On May 19, Italian rail workers held a 24-hour strike in a dispute over pay and working conditions. The rail

workers are members of the railway workers union, Orsa. The industrial action led to the cancellation of scheduled rail services across the country.

## **German building workers union threatens strike action**

The German construction workers union IG Bau stated on May 18 that it might begin a campaign of strike action in a dispute over pay. The union made a pay claim of 4.5 percent to the construction employers association, but has yet to receive a response.

The chairman of the union stated, “We will strike if it is necessary, and from the way things look now, it will be necessary.”

## **Nigerian civil servants resume strike**

15,000 civil servants in Plateau State, Nigeria have resumed their strike over non-payment of salaries and allowances, after the state government failed to honour an agreement to pay the outstanding amounts. The workers’ salaries for February and March 2002 are still unpaid, as is their leave allowance for 1999, 2000 and 2001.

The public sector workers ended their strike two weeks ago after an agreement was signed jointly by Carmilia Isemwan, the Plateau state head of service, and Yusuf Zambuk for the Joint Plateau State Public Service Council (JPSPSC, a body representing the eight civil service unions involved). The state government had agreed to pay all the leave transport grants from May 3, 2001, and to pay the outstanding salaries.

## **Nigerian railway workers launch sit-down strike**

Junior workers of the Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC) launched a nationwide sit-down strike last week to demand payment of their salaries for the last four months.

The assistant secretary-general of the Nigerian Union of Railwaymen (NUR), Martins Akinyanju, said the strike was in response to management’s failure to meet their demands after the expiry of a seven-day ultimatum, issued on April 25. The ultimatum had been

extended after the federal government approved a payment of N380 million (\$US3.3 million) to cover the unpaid wages, but this money has not yet been paid to the workers.

The union has put forward demands for the payment of the salaries and allowances for February to April 2002, and payment of accumulated overtime, related allowances and pensions. Those dependent on the corporation for their pensions have not received any payments for the last 19 months.

### **South African miners continue strike despite intimidation**

Two miners were being treated for serious injuries at a local hospital on May 20, after security personnel attempted to disperse striking workers using rubber bullets and teargas. The incident occurred at Harmony Gold Mining's Kalgold mine, Mafikeng, in South Africa. Two hundred and fifty workers have now entered their third week of strike action.

The miners are members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), and are demanding a wage increase of 12 percent, against the management offer of 5.5 percent. They are also demanding a housing allowance comparable with the company's other operations and a transport allowance of R700 (\$US70).

Strike action has also started at another of Harmony's South African mines, at Randfontein, where 5,000 workers took action over living-out allowances. The NUM has proposed a revised monthly allowance of R700 for living away from home—less than half its original claim, but still more than the company offer of R420—and has called for an agreement on the building of family housing to replace the present single-sex hostels.

Referring to recent increases in the price of gold and the fall in the Rand, Bernard Swanepoel, Harmony's chief executive, said: "To demand such a huge increase shows the confusion that the exchange rate and gold price have brought within the minds of some of our stakeholders."

Thamsanqa Joko, the regional chairman of NUM, denied Harmony's claim that workers' living-out allowances were among the best in the industry, and explained that the benefits concerned were given only to the highest paid workers at the mine. He said most NUM members received a living-out allowance of only R351. "Who can buy groceries with R351, when the

price of basic foodstuffs is so high?" he asked.

In a separate dispute thousands of NUM members staged protests at Harmony Gold Mining's operations in Welkom and Odendaalsrus in the Free State, after the company tried to unilaterally impose a new medical aid scheme.

### **Dam workers strike in Uganda**

Workers at the Uganda Electricity Generation Company Limited (UEGCL) at Nalubaale and Kiira hydropower dams in Jinja have taken strike action over their demand for a 20 percent rise in salary, after management offered only 6 percent. Over 200 workers have taken the action, leaving only a skeleton staff of 15 to maintain the generation of electricity. There is a risk of power failure without full manning.



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