

# Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

6 June 2002

## **Romanian workers strike to protest low pay and demand job security**

On May 30, thousands of Romanian workers took strike action in several cities throughout the country. The workers were protesting against working conditions in state run companies and demanding higher pay and pensions, lower utility prices and promises that they would not be laid off.

Romania's main trade union federations, the Alpha Cartel and the National Union Bloc, called the protests. The largest demonstrations were held in the capital city of Bucharest and other towns and cities, including Brasov and Bistrita and 25 others.

In Bucharest, 2,000 workers protested in front of the government headquarters and at parliament offices. In the Transylvanian city of Bistrita, 2,000 workers also demonstrated.

Around 6,000 workers from the state-owned truck and tractor factories marched in the pouring rain through the streets of Brasov, 180 kilometres (110 miles) northwest Bucharest.

The Romanian government is currently implementing an IMF and World Bank austerity package that includes the reduction in the number of workers employed by the state. Following an initial government refusal to lay off 3,100 workers for fear of provoking social instability, the World Bank and the IMF postponed decisions on granting new loans to Romania. The government has now agreed to sack the workers.

## **UK train staff continue dispute over pay**

Rail guards employed by Arriva Trains Northern took strike action on June 1 in their ongoing pay dispute. The strike lasted 24 hours and resulted in the cancellation of more than half of the train services.

The workers, members of the Rail Maritime and Transport union, voted for the stoppage after rejecting the offer of a four percent wage increase from the company. The strike took place on the first day of the Queen's Golden Jubilee Bank Holiday. Another strike

is planned for June 7.

Earlier in the week, retail and station staff at the company also held a 48-hour strike after rejecting the four percent offer.

On May 30, the Transport Salaried Staff Association cancelled planned industrial action against Arriva that was set to take place that week. Union members have also voted to reject the four percent offer. The union has requested further talks with the company and the Strategic Rail Authority on the dispute.

## **Tanker drivers vote to strike**

Four hundred oil and petrol tanker workers employed by P&O Trans European in the UK have voted to take strike action in a dispute over pay. On May 31, it was announced that the drivers had rejected a 2.5 percent pay increase.

The drivers are members of the Transport and General Workers' Union and deliver oil and petrol for the Shell conglomerate.

## **French medical practitioners continue strike**

On June 4, French independent medical practitioners continued their strike over the consultation fees that they are paid from the national health assurance scheme CNAM.

The doctors took strike action between 17.30 to 20.00 hours, as negotiations continued between the trade unions CSMF, SML, FMF, UCCSF and MG France, and CNAM. The "Coordination national des généralistes" that represents 30,000 general practitioners was not allowed to take part, because it is not recognised as trade union. Last week it organised a demonstration in front of the health assurance office in the town of Bayonne, where a confrontation with the CRS riot police ended with eight injured people (policemen and doctors).

## **Ghanaian port workers oppose effects of privatisation**

More than a thousand sacked dockworkers fought a pitched battle with police at Tema Port, Ghana, on May

31, after they had succeeded in closing down the port the day before. They were among the thousands of casual dockworkers who have been laid off, following the privatisation of a number of port activities, and were demanding an increase in minimal settlement fees.

The previous day workers blocked vehicles entering and leaving the port and preventing Atlantic Ports Services (APS) and Speedline stevedores unloading cargo. They marched from one end of the port to the other, singing war songs. One of the union leaders called in to try and defuse the protest was beaten by the workers.

On Wednesday, police, backed by two multi-purpose vehicles, fired tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the demonstrators. They chased the demonstrators hundreds of metres beyond the harbour perimeter and established a “buffer zone”.

The Director General of the Ghana Ports and Harbours Board (GPHA) insisted that the sacked workers had been employed as “casuals”, but admitted that “for a very long time” they had not been treated as such. He said the GPHA had paid out 20 billion cedis as “hand shakes” to 4,700 casual workers at Tema and Takoradi ports because they were not entitled to severance awards.

Alhaji Asuma Banda, a shipping magnate and board member of GPHA, has demanded more discipline in the maritime industry. He said the casuals had been pampered for years and maritime workers should channel their worries through their local Maritime Dock Workers Union.

### **South African travel lodge workers strike over non-payment**

Staff at the community-owned Phumulani Lodge in the Kruger National Park, South Africa, went on strike on June 1 over non-payment of their wages since October last year.

The lodge was opened by politicians last June, and was supposed to act as a model of community tourism. The 54 permanent staff at the lodge have not been paid for the last eight months.

The staff at the lodge belong to the Mdluli clan, who have won a claim to some of the land in the Kruger National Park, close to Numbi Gate.

The full salary of R1,100 had only been paid for the first four months, after which salaries and working hours were both cut by 50 percent. The operations

manager at the lodge, Amos Mdluli, admitted that the staff had not been paid for the past seven months, except in November and January, when they were paid R200—less than 20 percent of their original monthly salary. Mdluli said that wages had not been paid because all available funds were being used for operations. He blamed the non-payment on the lack of visitors to the lodge.

### **Sympathy strike of South African gold miners due to start**

News that the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has given seven-day notice of a company-wide strike at Harmony Gold, South Africa, caused a drop of more than 10 percent in company share values on May 30. The strike is due to begin June 6 and will involve more than half of Harmony’s 35,000 workforce.

The action, called by a shop stewards meeting at the union’s Harmony Council, is in sympathy with the 270 workers at Harmony’s Kalgold opencast mine, who are on strike for increased wages, travel allowances and medical aid.

The union has warned that the demands of the strike could be extended to include grievances of workers at other Harmony mines, particularly over the issues of living allowances and hostel accommodation.

NUM spokesman Moferefere Lkorotsoana said, “Housing and the question of single-sex hostels is one of the most critical items on the agenda and it will not fall off. And, of course, Harmony is not the only one who would have to deal with it.” He warned that the dispute could spread further, to the Freehold joint venture and rival gold producers.



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