

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

13 June 2002

Large demonstration in Spain against new attacks on welfare

A demonstration of up to 250,000 people was held in Seville, Spain on June 9. The protest was organised by the main union federations, representing two million workers, to oppose plans by the government to introduce legislation that would penalise the unemployed.

The march and rally lasted for around three hours and precedes a European Union summit on June 21. The unions have called for a nationwide strike to be held on June 20.

Under the proposals of Jose Maria Aznar's right-wing government, unemployment benefits would be restricted and measures introduced to cut salary payments to fired workers, even when their dismissal is still being reviewed by labour tribunals. The legislation also proposes to deny unemployment benefits to those who refuse jobs offered within a 50 kilometre (31.07 miles) radius of their hometown. Further proposals include measures to cut benefit payments to temporary agricultural workers.

The proposed general strike would be the first such action against the government. Unemployment in Spain stands at 11.5 percent, the highest in the EU.

Dockers in Belgium protest European Union proposals

Last week almost 8,000 dockers held a 24-hour strike at four of Belgium's ports. The dockers are protesting against plans by the European Union to deregulate the industry, including proposals to allow shipping companies to use their own personnel to load and unload cargo. Only unionised dockers presently carry out this work.

The June 7 action was organised by three trade unions in the ports of Zeebrugge, Gent, Antwerp and Ostend. Lorries and unaccompanied trailers were prevented from being loaded onto ferries, but passengers were allowed to board. A further strike is planned for June 17 to coincide with a meeting of EU transport officials.

London Underground staff to be balloted over safety

On June 10 the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union announced that it was to ballot 9,000 of its London Underground members for strike action.

The dispute is over safety concerns, as a consequence of the government's plan to part-privatise the Tube under a public private partnership (PPP). Under the new proposals

some 2,000 workers on the underground will transfer to private companies beginning at the end of this month. Voting will end on June 24 for strike action during the first two weeks of July.

British museum staff to strike against job losses

British museum staff are to strike for 24 hours on June 17, after voting by a majority of 85 percent for industrial action. The staff are members of two trade unions and are protesting against plans by the museum to shed up to 150 jobs. The national officer of the Public and Commercial Services Union, Terry Adams, said of the dispute, "Our members make a visit to the British Museum a safe and enriching one and they do not want to close it through strike action. But they are losing their livelihoods and seeing a great cultural institution being damaged because the government refuse to fund it properly."

Champagne producing workers strike to demand parity

Eighty employees of the champagne-producing group, Vranken-Monopol, took strike action on June 4 to demand parity with their colleagues.

On June 1, Vranken-Monopol bought the Pommery brand from the LVMH group for between 150 and 180 million euros, including the contracts of delivery, the stock, the factory in Reims, the administration and the exploitation of the wines and the staff of 180.

With the purchase of Pommery, the company now has a six percent share of the global champagne market. The striking workers demanded the same conditions at those of their new colleagues at Pommery. This includes a monthly premium of around about 228 euro for all 80 workers.

French railway conductors strike against increased workload

On June 5 a strike by railway conductors in the region of Bordeaux and Toulouse had a widespread impact on the state run SNCF in southwest France. The following day the Toulouse conductors returned to work, but Bordeaux staff stayed out.

The conductors are protesting against the increase in working time in the new summer timetable. On the same day a strike by conductors began in the region of Amiens, affecting the main rail connections of Paris-Amiens-Calais,

Paris-Amiens-Boulogne-sur-Mer and Amiens-Lille, with only half of the scheduled trains running.

The new government of President Chirac stated on June 7 that it plans to ensure a guaranteed minimum SNCF service during periods of strikes.

Hospital workers in Poissy, France strike

Hospital staff in the town of Poissy in the Ile-de-France region have been involved in strike action since June 3. The workers are employed at the SMUR and SAMU departments of the hospital and are demanding that the recruitment of 10 to 15 new medical staff and an additional 30 nurses.

French property cleaning workers continue strike

Workers employed by a property cleaning service are continuing the strike they began on May 29. The cleaners are employed by Massy in the Ile-de-France. They are protesting against the introduction of a 35-hour week that obliges them to work weekends.

Kenyan teachers angry over union climb down

Kenyan teachers in more than 70 branches across the country, who were expecting to go on an all-out national strike from June 10, are angry that their union has called off the strike and ordered them to work as normal. The strike action was planned over two months ago and was aimed at forcing the government to implement the final stages of a pay deal negotiated with the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) in 1997.

The 1997 agreement was signed after an 11-day national teachers' strike. The government agreed to a 150-200 percent pay award, to be paid in four phases and completed this year. Only the first phase has been implemented. Two months ago Education Minister Henry Kosgey told parliament that the government has no money to pay the teachers.

The Kenya National Association of Parents supported the planned strike, saying the government should have no trouble paying the teachers what was due to them. In calling off the strike, KNUT warned that any teacher who goes on strike would risk immediate sacking.

At their union branch's annual general meeting in Mwingi on June 9, around 3,000 teachers threatened to lynch their union officials. The teachers stood on their chairs and shouted, "Lynch them! Lynch them!" as frightened officials tried to defend their actions. The union's second national vice chairman, Amos Ngocho, was forced to sit down. Teachers reacted angrily to Assistant Minister Samuel Moroto's hints that they would get "something small" in the budget now being finalised. Moroto was West Pokot KNUT secretary before his election as Kapenguria MP.

Clothing union to join COSATU one-day strike

The Western Cape's largest trade union, the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (SACTWU),

has thrown its weight behind the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (COSATU's) call for a one-day strike against Metro Rail due to take place June 13. The protest was called under Section 77 of the Labour Relations Act, after negotiations with the company failed to resolve workers' concerns about the lack of safety and security on Metro Rail services.

The union has notified textile, clothing and leather employers about its intention to participate in the COSATU strike action.

SACTWU's Western Cape regional secretary, Aziza Kannemeyern, said, "Approximately 80 percent of our close to 40,000 members in the Western Cape make use of trains to get to and from work.... Our members and their families have been victims of violence and overcrowding on trains for many years." She added, "A recent example is the case of Mrs Shameelah Stevens, a clothing worker at Monviso in Epping. On 2nd May 2002, her 17-year old son was assaulted and thrown off a train. He died violently."

Zambian radio workers strike

Workers at recently opened Radio Choice in Lusaka paralysed the company's operations for several hours on June 4. They were demanding payments of accrued salary arrears.

The workers say they had not been paid since the station opened three months ago. They accused radio director Jimmy Pitcher and station managing director Ackim Hamwenda of siphoning resources for personal use at the expense of workers' wages. They complained that every time they asked for their salaries, they were threatened with dismissals. Cheques issued on June 1 could not be honoured at Lusaka Standard Bank because the account was empty.

One employee said, "We make a lot of money here at Choice. The radio makes over K60 million (\$US13,000) a month and it's difficult to believe that management can fail to pay a staff team of only 50." The workers also said the radio station owed various individuals and institutions an estimated K140 million for various logistical supplies.

Pitcher claimed he was not aware that employees had not been paid for months.

Operations at the station were restored to normal later in the day, after management promised that workers would be paid in cash in future.



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