Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

20 June 2002

Air traffic controllers strike throughout Europe

On June 19, air traffic controllers throughout Europe took co-ordinated strike action against new European Union proposals on deregulation.

The action in France, Italy, Portugal, Greece and Hungary resulted in cancellations and delays of hundreds of flights.

The air traffic controllers are campaigning against the implementation of a plan to restructure air traffic control on the basis of a new proposal known as the Single Skies plan. The central tenet of the plan is to replace national air spaces with new zones of control based on international air corridors.

Many air traffic workers are opposed to the plan on the ground that it will inaugurate the privatisation of the service, leading to job losses and undermining safety standards. The European Commission stated that an important factor in the new plan was to cut costs in the air traffic control industry. It estimates that the current system of air routings costs Europe 5 billion euros ($4.7 billion) annually in extra fuel, staff costs, and lost passenger time.

France was the worst affected by the dispute, with just 10 percent of short and medium-haul Air France services able to fly during the strike. Charles de Gaulle airport flew just 264 flights out of the normal 2,000 per day. At Orly airport near Paris, only 77 out of 660 flights were operating.

In Italy 50 Alitalia flights were cancelled and Air France was forced to cancel 22 of 23 flights from Rome.

The strike has also impacted on countries where controllers are not taking action.

British Airways was only able to schedule four services out of a normal 126 to France.

Germany's Lufthansa reported that 10 percent of flights to France had to be cancelled.

In Spain Iberia airlines were forced to cancel 60 flights to or from France, along with 57 domestic flights.

In Portugal 52 flights were cancelled by the national airline TAP.

In Holland the strike action led to the national airline KLM cancelling 20 flights to France, while other scheduled flights were subject to delays of at least four hours.

The strikes are set to continue during the summer months.

German construction workers begin strike

Construction workers in Germany began their first major national strike for more than 50 years on June 17. The building workers, members of the IG BAU union, are calling for a pay increase of 4.5 percent per year. There are 950,000 construction workers in Germany and many are located in the eastern part of the country and paid lower wages than workers in the west a decade after re-unification.

Union leaders and representatives of the employers had been involved in talks over a new pay deal up until June 1. The industrial action follows the result of a strike ballot announced last week, which was near unanimous in favour of taking action.

Construction industry employers have offered the building workers' unions a pay increase of 3 percent for the period from September 2002 until March 2003 and 2.1 percent for the following 12 months.

During the first day of the strike, the union announced that 8,000 workers walked off the job at 400 sites in the capital city of Berlin, the northern city of Hamburg and the industrial Ruhr Valley region in the west of the country. Some 100 workers in Berlin attended a rally at the Brandenburg Gate. In Hamburg a further 500 workers attended a rally and demonstrated at a construction site.

The industry is currently going through a slump. Earlier this year Germany's second-biggest construction firm, Philipp Holzmann AG, filed for bankruptcy.

Public service workers strike in Greece to oppose anti-welfare legislation

The largest civil servants' union in Greece called a 24-hour strike on June 18 to protest anti-welfare measures by the Socialist Party led government.

During the day of action, some 5,000 striking workers protested in front of the parliament building. The national economy ministry was also a target for protest and a large banner was placed in front of it, demanding that parliament stop the "anti-labour" bill.

Among the proposals being put forward by the government are cuts in pensions and an increase in the minimum retirement age to 65.

The strike had a widespread impact on public transport, as many services were halted including flights and ferry services to and from Greece. The dispute also resulted in the

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closure of state-run schools, municipalities, ministries and tax offices. Public hospitals and ambulance crews operated largely with emergency staff and only emergency cases were treated.

Among the demands put forward by the union are full pension rights after 35 years of work, regardless of age.

Paediatricians in France strike over consultation fees, low pay

On June 17, independent paediatricians, those with their own practices, began a strike to demand an increase in consultation fees to 30 euros from the present rate of 22.87 euros.

The previous week the national assurance scheme CNAM refused to support the rise being demanded by the paediatricians.

The SNPF (syndicate national des pédiatres francais) trade union organized that strike and reported participation by between 60 and 100 percent of paediatricians in various regions.

The fees that are paid to the paediatricians have not increased for seven years and this had led to a fall in the average wage to 47,259 euros per annum. This compares with general doctors, who are paid 50,765 euros on average. There has been a fall in the numbers of paediatricians, with 42 percent fewer staff than 10 years ago.

The French doctors union has stated that they will continue the strike during evening and weekend shifts until their financial demands are met.

French riot police break through picket lines at food factory

Last week French CRS special police in Arles and Marseille in France broke through picket lines and opened the blocked gates of two factories owned by Lucustru. Workers had been striking for 30 days, after the food company was recently sold to a rival group, Panzani (group Paribas Affaires industrielles). Workers fear that the restructuring could lead to job losses and are also demanding an 8 percent pay increase.

Zimbabwean food workers strike over pay and conditions

Workers at National Foods Limited, in the Workington industrial area of Harare, began strike action on June 10 in protest at their pay and conditions. The strike brought production to a halt. The strikers said they would not go back to work until management had addressed the issue of pay and redundancy payments. They are also demanding that the human resources director, Golden Chekenyere, is removed from his post.

South African council workers protest lack of pensions

Hundreds of council workers of the Butterworth unit in Mnquma, South Africa, have been on strike for the last two weeks against the council's failure to pay into their pension scheme since 1998.

Council officials recently met with workers' representatives, but the management offer was rejected. The total amount that the council owes its workers is about R9 million ($900,000) for pensions.

Only two months ago, about 400 Mnquma municipal workers in the Butterworth unit carried out a weeklong protest, demanding that the council pay their outstanding pension money and recognise the workers' committee.

South African workers strike for better railways

Clothing workers in the Western Cape of South Africa organised a half-day strike on June 13, in support of the demand for better train services in Cape Town. The strike shut down the Western Cape clothing industry; with most of the 40,000 workers in the industry supporting the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (Cosatu) call for the stoppage.

Cosatu is demanding more security on trains and stations and free travel for the unemployed and the elderly. The South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union supported the strike call, saying 80 percent of its members in the Western Cape commute by train. Tony Ehrenreich, Cosatu's provincial secretary, said: "...the situation has reached crisis proportions, with workers being killed or maimed weekly, if not daily. So the strike is necessary."

Kenyan police attack striking cane-cutters

Many cane-cutters who work on the Awendo Sugarbelt were injured on June 12, when police in full riot gear attacked them for taking strike action. The strike was in protest at the non-payment of their wages.

Production of sugar was halted for some hours at the Sony Sugar Factory and business halted in Awendo town, when the angry cane-cutters were confronted by the police who accused them of starting fires on several farms within Sony's nucleus estate.

Hundreds of cane-cutters had earlier been turned away empty-handed by cashiers, after queuing up at one of the paying centres near Awendo town. The cashiers said they had not been given enough money to pay all the workers. The workers had threatened to lynch the Sony officers responsible for payment of their wages unless they were paid within two hours.

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