Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

22 August 2002

Postal workers strike in Ireland

Six hundred postmasters and postmistresses began a pay dispute in Ireland on August 19. The contracted staff are employed at 1,700 post offices and are refusing to open local sorting offices before 8.00am or to supervise and assist in sorting, leading to delays in the arrival of post.

The postal workers have been paid just £1.30 an hour for supervising and assisting with mail-sorting. The strike action was called by the Irish Postmasters' Union following a breakdown in talks between unions and management.

Scottish postal workers take unofficial action

Nearly 2,000 postal workers in Glasgow held an unofficial strike against a change in operational procedures on August 15. The employees walked off the job at Glasgow's main postal delivery office in Springburn and staff at nine of the city's other 33 delivery centres joined the strike. The walkout resulted in the delay of an estimated 500,000 items of post that day.

The strike began following changes in the working procedures of 75 junior staff. The staff had been sent to work at other centres to perform duties they had never done before.

Initially 20 staff on the late shifts walked out and they were followed by workers on night shifts and early shifts. The changes that the workers were opposing were agreed in advance by the Communication Workers' Union. During the course of the strike a CWU spokesman said, "We never back unofficial strike action. What we say to them is: 'Go back to work'. A number of them have been sent to different centres to do jobs they have never done before. We have been trying to pacify the situation for a couple of weeks."

Firefighters in South Wales demand pay increase

On August 17, 2,000 firefighters across South Wales held a march and demonstration in Swansea to demand an increase in pay. The demonstration began at the city's county hall and ended with a rally in Singleton Park.

Dick Pearson, the Fire Brigade Union's regional official, said, "We know the current level of wages paid to fire service workers affects not only firefighters and emergency fire control staff, but also their partners and children. National strike action in the British fire service now appears to be the only choice left to firefighters."

National pay negotiations between the fire authorities and the FBU are currently taking place, but no agreement has been reached. The union has stated that national strike action now looks likely. The government announced last week that Army, Navy and RAF personnel are to be trained to fight fires in the event of a strike.

The annual salary of a fully qualified firefighter with five years experience is £21,500, compared with £30,000 for a police officer.

Airport security staff in Ibiza threaten to strike

Security staff at the island of Ibiza's airport are threatening to provide minimum cover until the end of the month in a campaign for higher wages. The action is set to begin this week and will result in delays for those travelling to the popular holiday location.

Rubber bullets used against striking Namibian miners

Striking construction workers at the Skorpion Zinc mine outside Rosh Pinah, Namibia, faced police firing teargas and rubber bullets. Fourteen strikers were injured, one of them seriously, after the police sought to disperse a crowd of 300 to 400 workers holding a protest on August 15. Twelve of the workers were arrested.

The strikers are employees of construction companies brought in to build a zinc refinery on the premises. The Namibian building workers had begun their strike at 7.00am on the previous day to secure a pay increase

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and to protest against discrimination. The construction companies at the mine pay higher wages to South African employees, who make up over a quarter of the workforce.

Construction activities at the mine have been suspended until August 27. Before then, the striking workers are being told to reapply for their jobs.

Moses Shiikwa, at the Metal and Allied Workers Union head office in Windhoek, said they had received a letter from union shop stewards at Rosh Pinah, informing them that the Namibian building workers were dissatisfied with their wages of N$5 an hour (N$10.5 = US$1). The response of the union's national headquarters was to urge further negotiations with the management—they had not approved the strike action.

The Skorpion Zinc mine is a subsidiary of Anglo American. The company said in a statement that the police "unfortunately had to resort to firing teargas and rubber bullets to disperse a crowd of strikers".

Court workers strike in Malawi

Courts throughout Malawi have stopped working due to a strike of judicial support staff. All the country's courts from the Supreme Court of Appeal and the High Court down to magistrates' courts have closed. The workers are demanding a pay rise of 300 percent that was agreed by the Malawian Parliament two years ago. They include court reporters, stenographers, clerks, secretaries and guards. Defendants have to stay in jail, as court cases are postponed indefinitely.

Malawi's Ministry of Finance has made no provision in its latest budget to pay the salary increases, citing the country's "economic hardships". Malawi is currently suffering from a famine and millions of people are facing food shortages. A spokesman for the strikers pointed to the millions of kwacha (Malawian currency) spent by government ministers in addressing political meetings and the increase in expenses that MPs have just voted themselves.

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