

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

16 August 2002

Bank workers in Berlin, Germany strike

Two thousand bank workers took strike action in Berlin on August 9, resulting in the closure of 138 branches. The workers are taking selective strikes in a pay dispute ongoing since June 13. The Ver. Di service workers union is calling for a pay increase of 6.5 percent for the 460,000 bank employees in Germany. The employers are demanding that any new agreement includes some element of performance related pay.

Train drivers in northern England continue stoppages

On August 13, train drivers employed by the First North Western train company in the north of England began the first of three 48-hour strikes. The industrial action will affect the scheduled routes of the company in northwest England and north Wales.

The company and the rail drivers union, ASLEF, reached an agreement to end the dispute two weeks ago and the union agreed to call off a series of planned strikes. The deal included the drivers receiving an increase in pay of 19 percent pay rise over three years.

Last week the union reported that the company had reneged on the agreement and the strike dates were restored. ASLEF stated that First North Western had introduced “new and unacceptable” strings attached to the deal, including drivers being made responsible for picking up litter at stations. Two further stoppages are to be held on August 27-28 and September 10-11.

British Library staff walkout

British Library staff held a 48-hour walkout beginning August 8 in a dispute over pay. The action also affected the library’s Document Supply Centre at Boston Spa in Yorkshire. The librarians are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union, PCS, and held a strike over the same issue on July 29 that resulted in the closure of library reading rooms.

The staff are protesting an offer of a 0.4 percent pay rise. This follows an increase of 3.6 percent in August 2001—an increase of just four percent over two years.

Some of the library staff earn as little as £12,000 a year.

Call centre workers in Wales to be balloted for strike action

Some 400 call centre workers in mid-Wales are to be balloted shortly for industrial action in protest at the possible transfer of their jobs to facilities in India. They are employed in Newtown

by Reality, a subsidiary of Great Universal Stores, which owns home shopping catalogues Kays, Choice and Great Universal as well as the catalogue retailer chain Argos.

Reality is currently operating a month long trial to divert UK customer calls to a call centre in Bangalore, India that employs 50 workers. Reality employs around 4,000 workers in the UK and call centres in Wales employ a total of 24,000 workers. The call centres are operated by more than 100 different companies, with about half of these based in Cardiff.

Reality said the trial was part of its “growth strategy” and that “a number of other UK based companies already operate successful overseas call centres because of its cost-effectiveness.

Over a million take part in Israel general strike

Public sector workers in Israel went on a three-hour strike on August 12 to demand wage increases. The industrial action is the first in a series of planned protests to demand a cost-of-living wage adjustment and to oppose government plans to cut the 2003 budget. After three years of little or no inflation, consumer prices increased by 6.3 percent in the first six months of the year on the back of a sharp depreciation of the shekel.

The strike effectively shut all government offices, local authorities, municipalities, customs, railways, government owned companies, ports, banks and private industries that are unionised. Government owned Israel Radio went off the air. Israel Electric was also affected and the Bezeq telephone company’s operators and information numbers were not in service.

The Fire and Rescue Services and government hospitals were scheduled to hold union meetings during the strike period to maintain their readiness to respond to emergencies.

The strike went ahead despite a last-minute call by Histadrut trade union federation chairman Amir Peretz on prime minister Ariel Sharon to avert industrial action by negotiating a policy package that would compensate employees for inflation.

Peretz told Histadrut activists in Rishon Lezion that the strike would be a one-off action and that the government would have another two weeks to open talks with the union.

In July, the government approved \$1.9 billion in fiscal cuts in the \$44.6 billion 2003 budget to close a widening deficit. According to the Federation of Israeli Chambers of Commerce, each strike day costs the economy NIS 50 million (\$US6.4

million).

Israeli fuel depot maintenance workers continue strike

Workers at the Pi Glilot company, which maintains fuel depots across Israel, continued their strike on August 13 after talks with infrastructure ministry officials failed to bring an end to the strike, which began the previous day.

The workers are protesting forced vacation plans for 21 of the firm's 170 employees, as well as the closing of depots in Jerusalem and Be'er Sheva. Pi Glilot intends to lay off workers as a result of reforms in the fuel industry that have forced the company to reduce prices by about 20 percent, costing the company some NIS 30 million.

The workers stopped supplying fuel to gas stations, Ben Gurion Airport and the Israel Electric Company. This could lead to shortages in industrial and private fuel, including gasoline for vehicles and jet fuel. Since the fuel companies have reserves, the shortages would not be felt for several days.

The major gas companies have warned that if the strike does not end immediately, there could be fuel shortages in gas stations throughout the country, mainly in the Jerusalem and southern areas.

South African clothing workers strike

Workers are out on strike at the Puma Knitting factory in South Africa to demand a pay increase of 13 percent, rather than the 4.4 percent offered by the company. The workers are also demanding an increase in their provident funds, shift allowance and annual bonuses. The dispute began in the middle of July, and is now over four-weeks-old.

The workers are members of the SA Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (Sactwu). Wayne van der Rheede, the union's national organising secretary, said, "The company still insists that workers should work 48 hours in the first week, 42 during the second, 40 in the third and 38 in the fourth—totalling 168 hours a month. This will lead to staff working during weekends without overtime." He also pointed out that over 300 workers at Pastel Clothing, which is owned by the same company, came out on strike in support of the Puma workers at the end of July.

Van der Rheede said that replacement labour brought in by the company since the start of the strike had been unable to meet the demand for exports because they did not have the necessary skills.

The Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) was brought in to mediate between management and the union, but failed to find a settlement.

Puma Knitting is the Cape Town subsidiary of the Sherco group, a local commodity and fashion producer, which exports around 60 percent of its products to the United States and other countries. Products from the factory are sold in the US with labels such as Adidas Sports, Polo and Tommy Hilfiger.

Fuel deliveries stopped in Nigeria to protest attack by army and police

From August 9, workers have stopped deliveries of petroleum products to the Edo and Delta states in Nigeria, in protest at an

attack by the army and police on pickets at the Shell petroleum office in Warri.

Both the pickets who were attacked and the present strikers are members of the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas (NUPENG). The pickets had gathered at the Shell office in Warri to protest the sacking of contract workers by Shell petroleum, when they came under attack themselves.

General Secretary of NUPENG Joseph Akinalaja told the Nigerian *Vanguard* newspaper, "Our zonal office in Warri is handling the matter and it has to do with contract workers of Shell that were sacked by the company that engaged them. This happened last month. All efforts to get them back to work proved abortive. So, yesterday [August 7] the Warri zonal council of our union met and resolved to picket the company over casualisation...."

"When they got there, they met policemen and army. They brutalised a number of our officials. We are yet to determine the number of casualties. Because some of our zonal officials were involved, there is a sit down protest action going on right now as I speak to you involving the contract workers, the real Shell workers who are members of NUPENG and Petrol Tanker Drivers (PTD) whose officials were also brutalised. In reaction to that lifting of fuel has been stopped."

On August 6, a separate strike was organised by the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN). Its members picketed the premises of Chevron-Texaco Overseas, to protest against its anti-labour policies. PENGASSAN said these policies had been particularly shown by the transfer, without consent, of workers from Texaco Overseas (TOPCON) to Chevron. The strike was effective in stopping the company from operating, in spite of the efforts of the police.

In another related event on August 9, thousands of women from the states of Ijaw, Itsekiri and Ilaje invaded the offices of two major oil companies—Chevron-Texaco Overseas and Shell—to protest against both the lack of development for the people of the region, and environmental degradation, such as gas flares, acid rains and oil spillage. This was the second such action by the women of the oil producing region in recent times: the previous one took place in July.



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