Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

27 September 2002

Rail workers and pilots take strike action in Italy

On September 22, rail workers in Italy began a 24-hour strike in a dispute over contractual issues and a failure to hire new employees. The strike led to the cancellation of half of all scheduled services of the state rail company Trenitalia.

Pilots at the airline Alitalia held a four-hour strike on September 17 that resulted in the cancellation of 110 scheduled flights. The employees are protesting at plans by the airline to sell its charter operation, Eurofly, fearing this could lead to the loss of 400 jobs. The pilots are to hold a further 10-hour stoppage on September 28. Other protests are scheduled to be held in October and November.

London Underground workers continue action over pay claim

On September 24, staff on the London Underground network held a further 24-hour strike in an ongoing dispute over pay. The action is in protest at the imposition of a three percent pay rise by management of London Underground.

The strike brought the underground metro system to a standstill because it involved Rail Maritime and Transport union members, who are mainly station and signal staff, and members of ASLEF, the train drivers union.

Arriva Trains dispute continues

Conductors, retail and station staff employed by Arriva Trains Northern took strike action for 24 hours on September 21. Arriva runs passenger train services in the north of England.

The strike was the 19th in a dispute over pay that has lasted more than nine months. A delegation of strikers demonstrated outside Newcastle railway station. The Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) has rejected a four percent pay rise plus 1.4 percent for productivity gains and a further three percent increase from next April.

RMT general secretary Bob Crow said this week, "After nine months in dispute, Arriva must understand that RMT will no longer tolerate what are amongst the lowest pay rates in the rail industry. Yet they have even tabled an offer to our conductors which is worth less than the one they made six months ago. Arriva have been trying to bully our members from the very start of the dispute. They have cancelled safety courses, threatened to sack people for talking to the press, [and] told members they won't be promoted if they continue to strike."

Bristol postal workers take unofficial strike action

Postal worker's employed at the Royal Mail's depot near Bristol began unofficial strike action this week to protest at plans to sell off Cashco, which delivers cash and high value items. The workers walked off the job on September 23 after plans were revealed regarding the sale of Cashco to Securicor. The action initially involved 30 workers who were joined by another 90 colleagues the following day.

A Royal Mail spokesman admitted, "We are in negotiations regarding the sale of the Cashco business and Securicor has been identified as the preferred bidder." Union officials are to meet in London later this week to discuss the proposed sell off.

British firefighters demonstrate to demand higher pay

Firefighters from England, Ireland and Scotland demonstrated in Birmingham in the West Midlands on September 23, in pursuit of a pay increase of around 40 percent. The award would bring their pay up to a basic of £30,000 a year, in line with other professionals in the public services.

The demonstration involved some 3,000 firefighters who marched through the city before holding a rally in Victoria Square. One speaker at the rally said that a recent survey showed that 79 percent of those polled in the West Midlands supported the firefighters' claim. The result of the strike ballot is to be announced on October 18.

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Solidarity action in support of South African textile strikers

Three and half thousand workers at five Western Cape clothing and textile companies downed tools on September 23 in solidarity with workers at the textile firm Team Puma, who have been on strike for 10 weeks in support of wage demands.

The factories affected were Cape Underwear, a subsidiary of the Seardel Group, Pastel Clothing, a Sherco subsidiary, Maximore, the manufacturer of Adidas branded socks, Romatex Home Textiles and Finitex. The mostly women workers at Cape Underwear and the other companies marched to the gates of Team Puma, where they danced and sang protest songs.

Wayne van der Rheede, national organising secretary for the South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union, warned that the union was planning another sympathy strike on September 25, which would hit 10 companies that have business dealings with Team Puma and planned to bring out additional companies from the Seardel Group.

Zimbabwean government threatens airline workers

The Zimbabwean government has ordered striking airline engineers to return to work or risk losing their jobs. The Air Zimbabwe employees have been on strike for two weeks in support of salary increases.

On September 24, Transport and Communications Secretary, Colonel Christian Katsande, said that the government had directed the airline to immediately restructure their engineering department: "We should, within the next 24 hours, know the number of workers who are interested in working at the airline. Those who shall remain on strike will adversely be affected."

He claimed the strike was illegal and warned, "the government will not sit by and watch the airline come to a halt."

The day before the government made its threats, Airzim offered an increase in the engineers' monthly allowance and awarded all workers a 15 percent increment. A spokesman for the Zimbabwe Aircraft Maintenance Engineers Association said that the offer was far short of what the union wanted and few engineers would benefit from the increased allowance offer.

Kenyan government revokes teachers' 1997 pay deal

The Kenyan government has responded to the national teachers' strike that began on September 22 by revoking a 1997 pay agreement. The decision to arbitrarily cancel the salary agreement was published in the *Kenya Gazette* supplement.

The strikers are demanding the implementation of the final stage of the agreement, signed in 1997, which awarded increases of between 150 and 200 percent, only the first phase of which has been implemented. The government insists there is no finance to meet the increased wage bill. The strike was called by the Kenyan National Union of Teachers when negotiations broke down.

The government is threatening action against the strikers. Education Minister Henry Kosgey ordered teachers to report to work immediately or face disciplinary action.

Despite the government intimidation, including the possibility of evicting striking teachers from schoolhouses, there has been strong support for the strike. All over the country, primary, secondary and boarding schools are deserted.

There have been violent clashes between the police and strikers in many places. According to the *Nation* (Nairobi), several teachers were injured in Nakuru, Vihiga and Lodwar when police threw tear gas canisters and attacked them. In Vihiga union officials were arrested for leading the demonstration, but were later released. In Lodwar, one teacher, Muhindi Maragoli, was injured and taken to the local hospital.

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