

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

18 October 2002

Fiat workers in Italy protest against job losses

On October 11, Fiat autoworkers staged a number of protests throughout Italy against plans by the company to shed nearly 20 percent of its workforce. Fiat plans to make 7,600 workers redundant and offer a further 500 transfers or early retirement.

The job losses are the centrepiece of a restructuring plan designed to cut labour costs by some \$250 million a year and in preparation to sell Fiat to General Motors or another manufacturer. General Motors bought a 20 percent stake of Fiat Auto in 2000.

These job losses follow a previously announced 3,000 cuts. Fiat employs about 35,000 people in Italy and is the country's largest private sector firm.

All 1,800 workers will be made redundant at Fiat's Termini Imerese plant in Sicily, where the unemployment level is already 20 percent. Termini workers protested with road and rail blockades in the week prior to October 11.

In Turin, where Fiat is headquartered, workers staged a four-hour walkout that began on the overnight shift. The strike continued with similar four-hour strikes on the afternoon and evening shifts. At the main Turin plant at Mirafiori participation in the strike was about 90 percent and around 80 percent at the nearby Magneti Marelli and Comau automotive parts divisions. These plants employ 17,000 workers in the Fiat group. A further 500 workers struck at the nearby Venaria plant and blocked a major road.

Italian President Silvio Berlusconi said that the government would hold talks with Fiat officials over the weekend. In the last year Fiat shares lost over 50 percent of their value due to falling sales and the global economic crisis in the auto industry. The firm has seen sales collapse in Europe and Latin America, previously some of its largest markets.

Polish workers demonstrate in Warsaw to demand job security

On October 15, 7,500 members of the Solidarity trade union demonstrated in Poland's capital city Warsaw to demand job security and to protest job losses in the national rail, coal and steel industries. The protesters were from the southern industrial region of Silesia and arrived in dozens of buses. They demonstrated for several hours before being dispersed by police with mace and the arrest of a number of participants.

There are fears that some 40,000 jobs could be lost if five coal mine holdings are liquidated. It is also projected that if Poland joins the European Union in 2004 around 10,000 steel workers jobs could go in restructuring. Job losses are also expected in state rail with unprofitable routes shut and fares increased. Unemployment in Silesia is 30 percent, almost double the national average of 17.4 percent.

Workers carried a large Solidarity banner and chanted antigovernment slogans during the demonstration. The protest stopped outside Prime Minister Leszek Miller's office, which was protected by metal barriers and riot police. One protester, a 40-year-old miner, said, "Everything this government is doing is wrong. They increase

food prices and rents, but they never increase our pay."

French social workers protest against government cuts

On October 11, the Fédération nationale des associations d'accueil et de réinsertion sociale (FNARS) organised a demonstration attended by 4,000 in Paris. FNARS is a front for more than 700 associations that organise social help schemes and assistance for homeless people.

The demonstration was supported by the Paris mayor's office and the CGT, CFDT and SUD trade unions. At the rally it was claimed that there would be a dramatic reduction of the 2003 budget for the CES (Contrats emploi solidarité). These are contracts that are financed by the state allowing charitable organisations to hire the young unemployed.

The protesting social workers also attacked a proposed security law that "criminalises those in poverty" and targets prostitutes, squatters, "aggressive" begging and the occupation of stairwells by juveniles.

Slogans on the demonstration included, "Steel for the army, Cardboard for the poor people" and "Let us struggle against exclusion, not against the excluded".

Prior to the Paris demonstration, a protest of 400 social workers was held in the southern city of Toulouse on October 9. The demonstrators pointed out that homeless shelters are very overcrowded and resources need to be increased. At Toulouse 1,000 homeless men a year require accommodation but only 60 persons can be admitted.

On the same day Dominique Versini, state secretary for struggle against poverty and exclusion, announced the creation of only 3,000 emergency home places nationally for this winter. FNARS denounced this as a "partial" measure, which would not resolve long-term homelessness problems. It said a minimum of 15,000 new home places were required in France. The group also criticised the 2003 financial budget, which actually reduces resources, and the former Socialist Party government, which also restricted the budget for two years.

French truck drivers continue protests

On October 15, truck drivers in France continued their protest for better working conditions by demonstrating on the Europe Bridge and the Pierre Pflimlin Bridge at Strasbourg. The action represented the sixth protest day as part of an action organised by the International Transport Federation (ITF) that has seen several road blockades.

Nigerian council workers strike against non-payment

Council workers in Gombe State, Nigeria have been on strike since October 11 over the non-payment of more than N300 million (\$US2.35 million) in salary arrears by five of the country's 29 local government councils. The Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) issued the strike call on October 10 after negotiations with the government broke down. The union initially gave a 21-day ultimatum to the employers. This was extended to 35 days, after pleas by top government officials.

NULGE state secretary Garba Adamu said the union decided to strike because of the non-payment of four months salaries by Gombe

Akko, Kaltungo, Balanga and Billu councils. He said that to make the strike effective the union had called out council workers in all the local government areas in Gombe state in solidarity.

Air Zimbabwe engineers on strike

Over 100 Zimbabwean aircraft engineers are standing firm in their strike, which began on September 11, against the national airline Air Zimbabwe. The engineers met in Harare on October 11, under the auspices of the Zimbabwe Aircraft Maintenance Engineers Association (ZAMEA) to discuss future plans, after management issued 133 notices to striking engineers summoning them to disciplinary hearings. The letters accused the engineers of “misconduct, that is, contravening the part of the Air Zimbabwe Code of Conduct . . . absence from duty without prior permission, reasonable excuse or valid reason for a period in excess of five working days” and said they were suspended. ZAMEA officials announced that none of the engineers would attend the hearings.

Air Zimbabwe is threatening to dismiss some of the suspended engineers as a cost-cutting measure. An official told the media, “War veterans, members of the air force and novices from private aircraft companies have already been invited to replace a good fraction of the suspended engineers, for salaries below the engineers demands, and below the going rates.”

Zimbabwean teachers sacked for going on strike

The Zimbabwe’s Public Service Commission has dismissed 625 striking members of the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) for not returning to work by October 11. With inflation currently at around 135 percent, the teachers are demanding a 100 percent salary increase backdated to January this year and another 100 percent cost of living adjustment backdated to June.

Government minister Thompson Tsodzo said, “They think we are a club for making jokes. We are not, these teachers are dismissed and there is no going back on this.” He denied that the teachers, who are from 14 schools in Harare and Bulawayo, have been selectively victimised, despite the fact that schools across the country have been affected by the strike.

The government has declared the strike illegal, claiming that PTUZ did not wait the obligatory 14 days before embarking on the strike. PTUZ Secretary-General Raymond Majongwe has denied this. He said, “A simple reference to the Constitution and Labour Relations Act will amply demonstrate that the teachers are on a lawful strike, having taken all steps required of them by law.”

Majongwe was arrested last week under the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) for allegedly threatening teachers who refused to join the strike. Majongwe’s lawyer Tererayi Gunje told the French new agency AFP that his client was seriously injured while in custody for 48 hours: “He has been beaten up and when I saw him yesterday night [October 9] he couldn’t sit on his own. I think he has broken ribs and internal bleeding.” He has since been released on bail of 15,00 Zimbabwean dollars (\$US273).

Department of Information senior press secretary Steyn Berejena has announced that there is no shortage of teachers in Zimbabwe and the government will make arrangements for the replacement of striking staff. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions has sent a letter to President Robert Mugabe protesting dismissal of the 627 striking teachers and condemning Mojongwe’s arrest.

Angolan teachers on strike

On October 14, primary and secondary teachers in Angola’s Northern Uige province went on strike demanding the payment of annual bonuses still owed to them. Other demands submitted to local

government in May this year include concerns over teacher training, school furniture, construction and rehabilitation.

Teachers’ union provincial secretary Ernesto Miguel told the Angolan Press Agency that the strike would continue until all their demands are satisfied.

Striking teachers reject Kenyan president’s appeal

Striking teachers in Kenya have rejected an appeal from President Moi to return to work so that national examinations could go ahead.

After a four-day ultimatum to the government to settle their claim, KNUT Secretary General Francis Ngang’a said the union would team up with parents, students and teachers to ensure that the examinations do not take place.

High Court Civil Division Duty Judge David Rimita has extended orders blocking the government from revoking the 1997 teachers’ pay increase which precipitated the ongoing national strike.

In Taita-Taveta, teachers vowed not to supervise or mark national examinations unless the government resolves their salary increment issue. They called on students to oppose supervision by unqualified people.

In Siaya town in western Kenya, scores of people were injured when police fired live bullets and tear-gas canisters to disperse hundreds of teachers during an examination briefing convened by District Education Officer Timothy Opot. Several teachers were arrested while others sought treatment for their injuries at the local district hospital.

In Kisumu, at least 100 teachers have rejected an offer by the Kenya National Examinations Council to invigilate and supervise examinations.

Provincial Director of Education for Rift Valley Gabriel Lengoiboni threatened that if the striking teachers fail to supervise and invigilate examinations, the ministry would hire civil servants, teacher trainees and university students to take over their role.

According to the *East African Standard* (Nairobi), the newly formed Nairobi Primary Schools Parents Association has said it will not accept any freshly hired teachers in their schools. Babetuu Amutavy, the organisation’s chairman, told the paper, “Those teachers being hired by the Teachers’ Service Commission should know that they are being hired by a dishonest employer.”



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