

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

8 November 2002

## Swiss construction workers hold biggest strike in 55 years

The biggest strike in Switzerland in 55 years began on November 4. It involved more than 13,000 construction workers who are demanding a lower, voluntary retirement age.

The strike began in the evening at the new railway site at Faido in the Alps, before spreading to some of the largest building sites in the country. During the 24-hour strike that hit more than 100 building sites, the workers blocked roads and tunnels across the country and held a number of demonstrations involving several thousands. In the capital city of Geneva 3,800 workers joined the strike, leading to the closure of nearly all building sites.

Building industry unions, the SIB (industry and building) and SYNA, have said that employers have reneged on promises to pay workers 70 percent of pay if they chose to retire at 60. The president of the SIB, Vasco Pedrinam, said that more strikes would be held if an agreement could not be found. Pedrinam said this week, "We're not planning to fire all our shots at once. If this doesn't work then we will strike again, only next time it will be even bigger."

The strike follows a series of large-scale redundancies at firms throughout Switzerland and the recent collapse of the flagship carrier Swissair.

## Lecturers and support staff strike in England

On November 5, lecturers and support workers took strike action in England in a dispute over pay. The strike led to the closure of up to 40 further education colleges. The action marked the first time in a decade that any of England's general FE (Further Education) colleges have closed as a result of industrial action. The NATFHE and ATL lecturers unions and UNISON, the public sector union, called the strike. The closed colleges represented about 10 percent of general FE and specialist colleges. A further 15 percent of departments were closed as a result of the strike.

The Association of Colleges offered the staff a pay deal of 2.3 percent, but this was rejected. NATFHE has claimed that an average further education lecturer earns £3,000 less than a teacher doing similar work. UNISON has stated that two-thirds of FE support staff earn less than £13,000 a year and a fifth less than £10,000.

## Public sector workers and doctors in Portugal to take industrial action

Last week Portugal's Independent Union of Doctors (YES) called a national strike for 14 and 15 November. The strike is set to coincide with national action by public sector unions. The doctors union issued a statement on the planned strike criticising the government's health policies and stating their sympathy with the public sector workers. The statement read in part, "YES decided to call a national strike of doctors on November 14 and 15

not only to demonstrate its solidarity with all public sector workers but also to protest against the current politics of the government in the area of ... health."

The public sector workers are protesting changes to the regulations governing retirement of public officials, cost-cutting measures and a lack of wage increase proposals. November 14 has been chosen for the strike as parliament is expected to vote that day on the national budget for 2003.

## Bus drivers in Bordeaux, France strike to protest violent attacks

Bus drivers at the Bordeaux bus company Connex in France held a one-day strike November 4 in protest against increased levels of violence by passengers. The drivers are member of the Force Ouvrière trade union and the action received the support of 100 percent of the employees. The strike stopped the 500 buses which normally transport 25,000 people a day around the region.

The FO ended the protest after the prefecture of the Gironde region gave a written guarantee to furnish 50 additional national policemen to create a new transport-police department for the region in January or February of next year.

## Port workers in France strike

On October 31 excavation workers blocked the merchant port at Dieppe in France. The strike began following concerns by workers over the future of the excavation service. The action prevented ferries from travelling between Dieppe and Newhaven from 07.30 to 17.00.

On the same day port officers began an indefinite strike at Cherbourg, preventing ferries travelling to the UK and Ireland. The 75 officers are protesting onerous working conditions, including working time schedules.

## Striking Gambian printworkers speak out on working conditions

Printworkers in Kanifing, Gambia, staged a sit-down strike November 5 to protest poor working conditions and corrupt management.

Some of the workers complained bitterly that management had concentrated on self-promotion, while ignoring those who had spent "all their lives at the department." They spoke of corruption, financial mismanagement and unfair promotion by those at the top.

One employee explained, "This place is in shambles with most of the machines not functioning and yet our hard earned monies are being wasted at gala nights to our detriment. We operate under inhuman conditions, we inhale chemicals and when we work overtime, the telephones are locked. What would we do in case of emergencies?"

Another employee complained, "Our overtime remunerations are still pending. Some of us have been here for 18 years without

promotion. Those who came yesterday are promoted and earn fat salaries. Most of the staff were made redundant and new ones brought in.”

The workers demanded that management either withdraw the promotions handed out to four staff in the finance department “or let them upgrade all of us.”

#### **Zimbabwean health workers back on strike**

Health workers in Zimbabwe have gone back on strike for the third time in three months over their poor salaries and working conditions. The workers, who have been on a go-slow for the past week, began a full-scale strike on October 25, accusing the ministry of breaking its promise to increase salaries by the end of that month. Those on strike include laboratory scientists, pharmacists and radiographers. The workers first took action in August after a review of doctors’ salaries and allowances.

“We received our salaries on Friday and there is no increment as we were promised. We have sought clarification from our ministry and we have been told to wait for communication from them.... It is better they tell us that there is nothing than just keep quiet,” said Trust Chivasa, a spokesman for the workers.

#### **Namibian furniture workers fight suspension of strike leaders**

Workers held a demonstration outside a Furniture Mart store in Windhoek, Namibia, on November 1, to oppose the suspension of four shop stewards for leading a strike. The short stoppage of the previous week—held in protest at the lack of a wage increase—was branded an illegal strike, justifying the action against the leaders.

The workers said the stoppage was not a strike but a demonstration and demanded management suspend either all of them or none at all. Clifton Gaseb, one of the suspended shop stewards, said management’s action was “needless”, insisting the workers had done nothing wrong. Benni Lepen, another shop steward, said that the promised wage increase had not been given to all the workers and was less than they had expected.

The matter will now go to the Labour Commissioner, with the union, the Metal and Allied Namibian Workers Union (Manwu), having already declared a dispute. The Labour Commissioner’s office will now mediate between management and the union to avoid a strike. Furniture Mart does not have a recognition agreement with the union.

#### **Nigerian workers’ case taken up by peace movement**

Workers at the Lagos Liaison Office of the Federal Ministry of Works and Housing, protesting against the delay in payment of their salaries, allowances and other entitlements, have taken the unusual step of inviting a peace movement to take up their grievances. They held a protest meeting at the back of the Race Course addressed by Mr. Mike Uyi, president of the Global Peace Movement (GPM).

A spokesman for the protesters told the newspaper *Vanguard* that they had invited GPM to take up their case after it had gained prominence for campaigning on behalf of retired soldiers whose pensions and gratuities had been delayed for years. The workers took this action because the union they belonged to, the Amalgamated Union of Public Corporations, Civil Service Technical and Recreational Services Employees (AUP TRE), had done nothing to help them.

“Since May this year, we have suspended payment of check-off dues to AUP TRE, because they have not been able to protect our interest since authorities at the Ministry of Works began delaying payment of our salaries and other emoluments,” the workers’ spokesman explained.

As well as the union ignoring their plight, there was rivalry between five unions over which of them the workers should belong to. “This was another reason why we decided to stop payment of check-off dues to any of the unions until they resolve their differences,” the spokesman added. “Again we observed that some of them were taking more than N200 instead of N30 from our monthly salary” (N127.4 = US\$1).

GPM has met with management over the delay in payment to the workers as well as petitioning the Minister of Works and Housing.

#### **Mozambique casino workers on strike**

Workers at the Sol Libombos Casino, in the southern Mozambican town of Namaacha on the border with Swaziland, have gone on strike in support of the secretary of their trade union committee, Justino Eugenio, who was suspended last week.

Artur Rocha, chairman of the Sol Libombos management board, claimed that the strike was illegal and that Eugenio would never work there again because he had acted with a “lack of respect”. The strike is supported by the National Union of Tourism and Hotel Workers, whose official told reporters that they had followed all the legal steps before embarking on the strike. He accused management of not informing them of any alleged error committed by Eugenio or of his subsequent suspension.

Mozambique National Inspector of Games Augusto Sumburane confirmed receiving a letter from the Sol Libombos workers denouncing “irregularities” in the casino.



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