Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

10 January 2003

French factory workers begin occupation to oppose factory closure

Employees of Daewoo Orion at Mont-Saint-Martin, Meurthe-et-Moselle, Lorraine in France began an occupation of the factory on January 2 in opposition to plans for its closure. The employees produce cathode pipes at the factory.

The decision to occupy was taken during a general assembly on January 2, at which 250-300 of the 550 workers decided on a "radicalisation of the movement". The occupation involves members of the CGT, FO and CFTC trade unions who blocked the factory entrance and roads in the local area. Some of the workers threatened to pour chemical substances including into the river Chiers if an agreement were not reached by January 8. A decision on the factory's future is expected the following day.

Daewoo Orion has debts of 3,400,000 euros and its bankers are demanding that it immediately stop paying its workforce, currently on short-time. At the end of November, the Daewoo Orion group shut the first of its three Lorraine factories at Villers-la-Montagne, employing 227 workers. That factory produced microwave ovens. The company also closed its television manufacturing plant at Fameck at the end of December, making 170 workers redundant.

Bus drivers in Norwich, England strike over working conditions

Bus drivers in Norwich in Norfolk, England began a weeklong strike on January 6 in a dispute over changes to working conditions.

The strike began following a breakdown in talks on January 4 between the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) and First Eastern Counties buses. The company are attempting to break the strike by using managers to drive 22 buses and said it hoped to bring in First Eastern Counties drivers from other parts of the country to drive buses on other routes.

Farming unions in Spain call strike over employment subsidies withdrawal

On January 5 the two main farming Unions in Spain called for a farm strike to be held in the southern part of the country on February 20.

The strike has been called by the General Workers Union and Workers Commissions trade unions in response to the refusal of the Spanish government of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar to restore off-season subsidy payments to farm workers. The strike will involve farm workers in the agriculturally intensive southern regions of Andalusia and eastern Extremadura.

The unions are demanding that subsidies be restored to some 230,000 seasonal farm workers when they are not employed. The government ended the subsidies in May as part of its reform of unemployment benefits. At the same time it also legislated to eliminate salary payments to workers who had been fired and were appealing in court.

Probation staff in England and Wales vote to strike

Probation staff in England and Wales have voted for industrial action in a dispute over increased workloads. The employees are to hold a one-day strike on January 29 followed by a work-to-rule.

The 6,000 probation workers are members of the Napo trade union and voted by a margin of two-to-one in favour of strike action, with 86 percent voting in favour of the subsequent work-to-rule.

Napo has stated that workloads had increased by 50 percent but staffing levels by just 10 percent in the last decade. The assistant general secretary of the union, Harry Fletcher, said, "We're saying to the government, stop giving us more and more work to do or supervision of offenders will collapse. The action is taken with great reluctance but frustration levels amongst staff are extremely high."

The union has called on the Home Office to enter the dispute and act as a mediator and have said they will continue to negotiate with employers up until the proposed strike date.

Talks held to prevent national public sector strike in Germany

Last ditch efforts are continuing to prevent Germany's first national public sector strike in more than a decade,

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after negotiations between employees and the Verdi service union broke down on Monday.

Verdi are calling for a 3 percent pay increase over 18 months for Germany's 3 million public sector workers. Employers' representatives have offered just 2.8 percent. One compromise under consideration is a revised version of the 2.8 percent offer, involving additional pay for an extra 30 minutes work per week, and a settlement lasting 20 months or more.

Selective strikes by public sector workers last month caused severe disruption to air travel and public transport. Nurses, teachers and refuse collection workers were also involved in the stoppage. If agreement is not reached, the union has said strikes could begin next week.

Zimbabwe textile workers fired for striking

About 1,000 textile workers at David Whitehead Textiles Limited (DWT), Chegutu, Zimbabwe, were fired for taking industrial action in pursuit of a 107 percent salary increase. DWT issued a letter to the strikers describing their action as illegal and terminating employment from January 8.

Oliver Gwaku, the DWT human resources director, told the *Zimbabwe Daily News*: "The strike is illegal because their trade union has not sanctioned it. So to bring normalcy we have decided to fire all workers at Chegutu ... in the process we will weed-out undesired elements." Gwaku said that workers who wanted to be re-engaged could apply for their jobs back, whilst those who didn't would receive terminal benefits by the end of the week.

The strike began when workers walked out on January 4 because, instead of meeting the 107 percent pay demand (that is still below the rate of inflation), management offered increases in stages: 30 percent in January, 38 percent in April and 39 percent in September. A spokesman for the workers dismissed the management response: "We will not take such empty threats. Management must be concerned about solving this impasse instead of worsening the crisis."

Other workers in Zimbabwe have taken industrial action as inflation has eroded their pay. Postal workers at Zimpost have just ended a two-week-long sit-in over management's decision to stagger their agreed salary increments over 60 months. The dispute, centred in Harare and Chitungwiza, ended when management agreed to pay salary shortfalls on a monthly basis. Workers at the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (Zesa) took strike action for a 150 percent pay rise. They claimed that management had only offered 70 percent. Strikers outside the head office of the parastatal were attacked by riot police. A workers' spokesman complained that management had brought in the riot police in an attempt to provoke a violent response.

South African miners in dispute over death benefits

The South African National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has announced that it is in dispute with Impala Platinum (Implats) because the company is no longer paying death benefits—transport, coffin and mortuary costs—for employees who die from causes not related to mining.

Implats human resources executive Humphrey Oliphant said the decision was due to the exhaustion of funds used by the company for such costs, claiming that they were hit by the lack of profits from entertainment bars run by the company for the workforce. He said that deaths, mainly from HIV/AIDS, were running at an average of 16 per month.

Most of the miners are migrants and have to live at mines that are hundreds of miles away from their families, making funeral costs a major burden.

NUM spokesman Moferefere Lekorotsoana said: "Deaths resulting from HIV/AIDS in this industry are mining-related because the mine continues to accommodate black workers in conditions which are not conducive to human living and instead lead to the continued spread of the disease." He continued: "They (mining companies) created the problem and now they are running away from it. They must address the issue of letting workers live with their families instead of housing them in hostels." Lekorotsoana did not raise the issue of treatment for HIV/AIDS being funded by the company.

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