

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

21 February 2003

## **Autoworkers strike at UK Peugeot plants**

On February 13, workers held strike action at the Peugeot's main plant at Ryton, near Coventry in the UK. Staff at two smaller nearby plants also participated in the 24-hour strike. The industrial action was held by 3,500 workers, members of the Transport and General Workers Union, who struck in pursuit of an improved pay deal, halting production of 1,200 Peugeot 206 models. The stoppage followed a ballot by the workers last month in which 54 percent voted in favour of industrial action.

Peugeot said that it would not improve on its offer of a 7.3 percent pay rise over two years. A union spokesman said it wanted to avoid "a damaging dispute" and was "ready to talk at any time".

## **Train guards in northern England vote to continue strike**

Train guards employed by the Arriva Trains Northern in England have voted to hold further strikes in their long running dispute, after rejecting a revised pay offer from the company. In a ballot workers who have already held 20 days of strikes over the past year voted by two-to-one to reject Arriva Trains offer of a four percent rise plus a lump sum of £250. The industrial action, organised by the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union will be held on February 26 and 28, and March 3, 5, 7, 10 and 12.

The RMT is to hold a lobby of Parliament on March 12 regarding the dispute. RMT General Secretary Bob Crow said, "After a year of strike action they have again decisively rejected an insulting offer which is worth less with every passing day".

## **Firefighters' union in UK calls off strike for duration of talks**

Britain's Fire Brigades Union (FBU) decided this week that it would hold no further strike action for the next few weeks in order to continue talks with local authority employers and the conciliation service ACAS. The talks began on February 18 and are expected to last for at least four weeks.

The firefighters are campaigning for a fully qualified firefighters' basic wage to be increased by 40 percent from £21,500 to £30,000. During the course of the dispute, the FBU has indicated it would be prepared to settle for a much lower pay deal.

The negotiations follow a government announcement on February 13 that fresh negotiations would be held, and that the armed forces that had been used for emergency cover during

the dispute would now stand down. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott said, "At the end of the negotiating period, military personnel will be put back on standby to provide emergency fire cover if necessary".

The decision was made in preparation for the armed forces' role in the impending war against Iraq. Up to 19,000 troops had been mobilised by the government to serve as emergency cover during the dispute.

FBU leader Andy Gilchrist said at the beginning of the talks that he welcomed Prescott's "useful and helpful intervention", which would enable "constructive and substantive" negotiations to begin. He added, "The union and the public at large will welcome the return of common sense to this dispute."

## **Banque de France staff strike over branch closure and job losses**

On February 13 the SNA, CGT, FO, CFDT, CFTC and SIC trade unions held a 24-hour strike involving 16,000 employees at the Banque de France. The unions reported that more than 75 percent of the employees took part in the action.

Outside the capital 150 branches did not open. In four regions—Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Bretagne, Aquitaine and Midi-Pyrénées—all branches were closed. In Bretagne and Nord-Pas-de-Calais 95 percent took part at the strike. Following a general assembly of 600 employees at the Paris headquarters, workers staged a short blockade of the capital's central streets.

On February 7, management had presented two alternative restructuring plans. The first proposes cutting the existing 211 branches to just 60 branches in the course of 10 years. The alternative proposal, projected for the next five years, would reduce the number of branches by half.

The plans would cause job losses of between 2,500 to 3,200. Since 1995 the Banque de France has shed 2,500 jobs.

## **Lawyers at Toulouse, France strike to demand improved working conditions**

On February 18, most of the 840 lawyers at the Chamber of Toulouse began a strike to protest against working conditions at the courthouse. A spokesman for the lawyers said that the action may continue until March 3, when state secretary Pierre Bédier is due to meet with their representatives.

The lawyers had taken strike action in spring 2000, after which the then Jospin government promised to enlarge the court buildings. Bédier reneged on this promise last month, provoking the latest action.

## **Air France workers strike in campaign to oppose**

## **privatisation**

Nine unions representing Air France ground staff called for a 55-minute strike on February 12 to protest against privatisation. The action was held the same day as the Senate began discussions regarding the legislation of the Air France privatisation.

Three other unions organised a four-day strike, beginning February 17, mainly for higher wages. Starting during the school holidays. The action caused 15 percent of flights at the Roissy and Orly airports to be cancelled.

A four-day pilots' strike earlier this month for an increase in wages, based upon an agreement in 1998, has yet to achieve its demands. The 1998 agreement implied an exchange of wages for shares and to match pay to that of pilots on British Airways, Lufthansa and KLM. This adjustment has never been introduced. The unions are demanding an additional 8 percent increase for this year.

### **Air Lib workers protest against bankruptcy**

On February 17, 40 employees of Air Lib blocked the access road to the building site of Aéroconstellation de Blagnac, near Toulouse, where the A380 Airbus is to be constructed. The workers stopped vehicles and distributed leaflets protesting against the bankruptcy of Air Lib, pronounced by the commercial court of Créteil (Val-de-Marne) earlier in the day.

On February 18 Air Lib employees began a demonstration at the Orly airport by crossing the airport building and chanting: "de Robien [minister of transport], murderer!" They demonstrated behind a banner with the slogan: "Bussereau—de Robien: liquidators! Let us live and work. Employees of Air Lib."

The bankruptcy proceedings are generally regarded as a manoeuvre by the government in connection with the privatisation of Air France. The chief manager of Air Lib has said the government was pursuing the bankruptcy in order to make Air France more attractive for possible buyers.

The Raffarin government has promised to create jobs for the 3,200 persons made unemployed in other areas of the transport industry. However under the proceeding social plan of Air Lib in 2001 only 39 percent of the dismissed employees got new jobs and these were generally precarious.

### **Oil workers strike in Nigeria**

Staff at the Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR) in Nigeria went on strike from Saturday February 15, in support of demands including higher pay and payment of allowances arrears, some dating back to 2000. The staff, members of the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (Pengassan) who monitor the quantity and quality of crude oil leaving the terminals, are also demanding greater autonomy for the DPR. Talks between Pengassan and the government broke down last week.

Blue-collar staff at the DPR, who are members of the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (Nupeng), joined the strike on February 17. The strike is now

threatening to hit Nigeria's oil output of more than two million barrels a day, making up more than 80 percent of government revenue and more than 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings. Nigeria is the world's fifth-largest oil exporter and a major supplier to the United States. The strike has added to the fears stemming from the crises in Venezuela and the Middle East.

"The operation of the DPR is grounded," said Joseph Akinlaja, secretary general of Nupeng.

"Nothing is happening at the terminals and offices. The strike is proving its point. It's been very effective."

Shell, which takes about half of Nigerian oil production, claimed that shipments were "undisrupted"—with senior managers taking over posts from striking workers.

A spokesperson for DPR management, Mrs Belema Osibodu, said that DPR had called for a truce and invited union representatives for talks. The management of Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) will be meeting with the National Executive Committee of Pengassan at the corporation's headquarters in Abuja.

Long queues of cars have been reported at petrol stations in Lagos, the country's commercial capital, as well as the capital Abuja, due to panic buying of petrol.

### **Workers demonstrate to raise minimum wage in Ghana**

At least 2,000 workers demonstrated in the streets of Tema in Ghana and the capital Accra on February 12, in protest at the delay in negotiations on the new minimum wage taking place between the government, the Trades Union Congress and the Ghana Employers Association. After demonstrating in Tema, the workers drove in convoy to Accra.

The demonstration was called after fuel prices were increased by 94 percent last month. Since this affects all other prices, workers are demanding an increase in their wages by the same amount.

### **Strike hits Algerian ports**

Around 15,000 Algerian port workers held a one-day strike at 10 commercial ports on February 16 in protest at plans for privatisation. The strike brought the country's main ports to a halt, although oil exports were not affected.

An official from the main trade union, UGTA, said "Oil and gas export ports were not included in the strike." The union officials said they expected government proposals to lead to layoffs and less job security.



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