

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

14 March 2003

Port workers in Italy strike to protest war vs. Iraq

On March 11, workers in Italian ports took strike action during the last hour of their shifts to protest against the US using their workplaces to ship military equipment to the Gulf in preparation for war with Iraq.

The US has used a number of Italy's ports in the last month to transport military vehicles from bases around Venice to Camp Darby, its key installation near the western port of Livorno. The vehicles are expected to be shipped to the Middle East shortly.

The three shipping trade unions that organised the action have also called on their members to stop work for 15 minutes on March 14 in line with a call by the European trade unions. A statement said, "We, along with our European counterparts, want a 15-minute stoppage to remind governments to commit themselves to peace and to avoiding the strong and dangerous risk of a new war in the Gulf."

Recent opinion polls reveal that 70 percent of Italians oppose war, even if sanctioned by the United Nations.

German shop workers demonstrate against longer hours

On March 11, 20,000 people demonstrated in Berlin to protest plans by the government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to deregulate strict regulations on shop opening hours. The protest was organised by the Verdi service workers' union in the main shopping area of the capital.

The government has introduced legislation that would allow stores to open between 6.00 a.m. and 8.00 p.m., Monday to Saturday. Shops would still be closed on Sunday. At present, shops must close at 4.00 p.m. on Saturdays. The legislation is still waiting parliamentary approval.

Trade unions in Germany have opposed the measures on the basis that people have plenty of time to shop and that extra opening hours on Saturdays would separate shop workers from their families.

UK firefighters set to continue strike action

Firefighters in the UK are set to continue their campaign of nationwide industrial action. The workers are demanding a 40 percent wage increase to bring their salaries to £30,000 a year.

On March 12, the executive of the Fire Brigades Union called for a one-day strike to be held on March 20 after rejecting the employer's latest offer of a 16 percent pay deal over three years, tied to changes in working practices. The union stated that the offer was worth less than previous deals they have rejected and would significantly worsen conditions for firefighters. The FBU is to recall a national conference in Brighton next week to discuss the dispute.

The government immediately condemned the strike announcement, which could see firefighters striking at a time when the UK armed forces are involved in a war in Iraq. Referring to the impending war, the minister for local government and the regions Nick Raynsford said he could not believe that any "reasonable person" would refuse the offer at such a "sensitive time".

During the course of the dispute, the government has mobilised 19,000 army, navy and air force troops to provide emergency cover.

It has been reported that one of the main points of contention with the latest offer is the formulation covering conditions of service. The union allegedly requested the wording be changed from management determining the duty systems after "consultation" with staff to "agreement" with staff.

Local authority employers stated that the deal would not be improved and was a final offer. A spokesman said, "We are incredulous about FBU claims that there will be a new offer".

Engineering workers in Huddersfield, England to strike over job losses

Staff at a Huddersfield engineering firm in West Yorkshire, England are to begin an overtime ban and the first of a series of strikes on the evening of March 13. The employees at turbocharger firm Holset Engineering are protesting against plans to transfer some jobs at the plant to factories abroad. The 360 workers are members of the Amicus trade union. Recently other engineering firms in Huddersfield such as David Brown and Brook Crompton have moved their manufacturing operations to sites overseas resulting in hundreds of jobs being lost in the town.

Airline workers strike to oppose privatisation in France

On March 12, Air France pilots began a one-day strike that led to a number of scheduled flight cancellations from Paris's two main airports. Between five and seven percent of flights from Charles de Gaulle airport and 15 percent of flights from Orly airport were cancelled due to the action.

Nine unions called the latest stoppage in a long-standing protest by workers against privatisation plans.

On the same day legislation regarding the Air France privatisation was discussed at the Assemblée Nationale, the French Parliament. The government holds a 54.4 percent stake in the carrier and one option it has mooted is the sale of about 35 percent of the company's capital later this year. This would result in the airline becoming a majority private concern. At 2.00 p.m., the unions held a demonstration in front of parliament. Referring to the recent demise of another airline, a slogan of the campaign is "No, we don't want to end up like our colleagues of Air Lib".

The pilots' unions called for a strike to be held on the following two days—the third strike within the last month—to protest against limitations being made on the right to strike.

French railway workers strike

Train guards employed by the SNCF state railway service in France held a well-supported strike on March 11 and 12. The stoppage was held by guards in the Paris SNCF region, affecting regional traffic and train services travelling to further destinations on the eastern routes to Strasbourg and the Ile-de-France region around Paris. Unions called the strike to protest against management dismissing a train driver who had overlooked a stop signal.

On the same day a strike of train control personnel affected TVG and TER services at the Bordeaux station. The industrial action was caused by aggressive attacks on control personnel by members of the public.

Protesters demonstrate in Bressuire against job losses

Some 1,200 people took part at a demonstration in the town of Bressuire in France to protest against job losses in the region. Last week 200 workers were made unemployed by the bankruptcy of the Grimaud Logistique mail enterprise. The demonstration was held to show solidarity for the Grimaud workers and workers of regional textile factories, where the number of redundancies is increasing.

The CFDT trade union estimates that 1,000 jobs in the Bocage are already or will soon be lost. The bankruptcy of Grimaud Logistique,

which had been declared by the court of Bressuire, resulted in 1,184 job losses nationwide.

Demonstration against job losses in Lens

On March 6, demonstrators held a protest in the town of Lens, France in support of redundant workers at different factories of the Pas-de-Calais region, such as those at the Metaleurop foundry.

The demonstrators tried to enter the “sous-préfecture” (regional administration office), to interrupt a meeting of the minister of the public service, Jean-Paul Delevoye, and a delegation of trade unions. Demonstrators clashed with a police squad who attempted to push them back. The demonstrators then threw some bottles and stones and this was immediately met by the gendarmes who fired tear gas canisters. One of the demonstrators was wounded.

French chambermaids strike ends

The longstanding dispute involving chambermaids employed by Arcade and contracted to work for the Arcor hotel chain has ended. The strike began on March 7, 2002.

The chambermaids are all of African origin and had worked under very precarious conditions, often without legal documents and social rights. The dispute arose over their conditions that included working overtime without payment and having to clean large numbers of rooms.

This week a “confidential” agreement was made between Arcade, Arcor and lawyers. The agreement was not circulated to the maids and will remain with the three parties. It stipulates the number of rooms that have to be cleaned up per hour (a maximum of four and minimum of 1.9, depending on the hotel). It also deemed that trade unions agree to future conditions of work including working contracts of 130 working hours monthly.

Seven striking women that had been dismissed will be reinstated. All chambermaids, including those who did not take part at the strike will receive a premium. Strikers will also receive a 35 percent compensation of the wages lost for the last year.

Local government workers on strike in Nigeria

Local government workers in Edo State, Nigeria, went out on strike March 3 in response to the state government’s failure to pay their salaries for December 2002 and the first two months of 2003. The strike has brought the state government to a halt, with both the ministries and the parastatals (government-owned utilities) paralysed.

The Chairman of the Public Service Joint Negotiating Council (JNC) for Edo, Emma Ademokun, is reported to have called on the strikers not to go back to work until the arrears have been paid.

Kenyan sugar workers strike over rights and conditions

Around 600 tractor drivers went out on strike on March 3 at the sugar cane processing factory of Mumias Sugar Company, and they were still on strike at the beginning of this week.

The drivers are protesting against their poor working conditions and their lack of rights, such as the right to join a trade union. Currently, the strike looks set to continue, with the drivers refusing to return to work unless they are allowed to join the trade union of their choice, and management refusing to budge.

Workers representative Rumi Singh, told the media that the Ministry of Labour was to blame. He said the Western Provincial Labour Officer, Mr Francis Okello, had not properly advised the drivers and employers over the issue of trade unions: “The drivers want to join Kenya Sugarcane Plantation Workers Union while Mr Okello insists that they be registered under the Kenya Federation of Workers Union.”

Strike by Kenyan oil workers

About 2,000 workers at the Kapa Oil Refineries in Athi River yesterday burnt two vehicles, in a protest against poor working conditions and maltreatment by the management.

They fought running battles with riot police, who used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse them. The workers had been locked out of the

factory, but kept on regrouping.

Workers inside the factory set fire to the car of the resources manager, Joseph Ogoode, after he locked himself in his office behind steel gates, together with the operations manager. They were held hostage by the angry workers, until they were rescued by police officers later in the evening.

Nitin Shah, the chief executive officer, and members of the company’s top management team were holed up in another block guarded by private security guards and police officers.

The strikers accused Ogoode of being used by the company management to trample on their rights. He had dismissed 106 workers, including union officials, in December without giving them their terminal benefits, and another 38 last month.

Zimbabwean bank workers on strike

On March 7 workers at Central Africa Building Society (CABS) branches throughout Zimbabwe took strike action for the third time in three months. They were demanding a 10 percent cost of living adjustment, the dismissal of a senior manager and the reinstatement of four suspended workers’ committee members. Riot police surrounded the bank’s headquarters in Borrowdale.

The managers filed an application to the Labour Ministry to declare the strike illegal because the notification to strike was issued on February 14, more than the statutory 14 days notice required by law.

Trouble started in January when the workers demanded the immediate resignation of Brian Maphosa, the human resources manager at their headquarters, accusing him of nepotism and non-transparency in the recruitment of staff. They also demanded the reinstatement of four workers’ committee members who were suspended on allegations of calling an illegal strike.

Strike of Ghanaian port workers

Tema Port, near Accra was brought to a halt for two days last week when 2,000 casual workers went on strike to demand payment of unsettled arrears from their former employer, the Ghana Ports and Harbours Authority (GPHA). The Dock Labour Company Limited (DLCL), an amalgamation of about seven stevedoring companies registered to supply dock labour, have begun recruiting new hands to replace the striking workers.

On March 5, police backed by two water cannons, went into the port. The Ghanaian Chronicle reported that four policemen were injured when the police clashed with the stone throwing dockworkers. Soldiers from the First Battalion of Infantry are standing by near the port.

The problem began in the middle of 2002, when a section of the workers alleged that they were cheated of severance benefits.

Lecturers’ strike shuts down the University of Zambia indefinitely

The University of Zambia’s main campus in Lusaka has closed indefinitely and students are returning to their homes, as a strike by academics continues. The strikers are demanding a salary increase, better working conditions and back pay totalling 16 billion kwacha (about \$US3 million).

Education Minister Andrew Mulenga claimed that a resolution was “in the works”, and criticised the academics for taking hasty action.

Trywell Kalusopa, president of UNZA, the lecturers’ and researchers’ union said that his members would not call off the strike until all their outstanding arrears were paid: “The government talks about the brain drain and falling standards of education, but they do nothing to retain staff, or even motivate us.”

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