

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

25 April 2003

Czech steel workers strike over job losses

On April 23 workers at the steel maker Ispat Nova Hut (NH) in Ostrava in the Czech Republic struck for one hour from 9.00 a.m. in protest at dismissals. The company plans to sack more than 2,400 of the 11,300 staff by 2005. Two weeks ago, some 1,500 workers at the steelworks protested in front of the main entrance to the plant.

The workers are in struggle not just with the company but with trade unions at the plant who had agreed with management on March 24 that 580 workers could be dismissed this year. The unions' only complaint has been that NH did not consult on redundancies planned for 2004 and 2005.

This week the unions confirmed they are not opposed to job losses in principle. A statement read in part, "We only want the cuts in staff numbers at NH to be based on objective documents and analyses."

GIAT workers in France continue protests over redundancies

On April 16 thousands of workers employed by GIAT (a company producing military equipment) demonstrated in Paris against plans to make 3,700 workers redundant (two-thirds of all employees) and the closure of three factories.

The protesters came from Roanne, Verseilles-Satory, Bourges, Tarbes, Saint-Chamond, Toulouse, Tulle, Saint-Etienne, Cusset et Chapelle-Saint-Ursin and included all the main unions as well as representatives of local authorities in the affected regions.

Since April 7, when GIAT management announced the restructuring measures, protest actions at the affected towns and regions have increased. At Saint-Chamond, where 700 workers will lose their jobs, a majority of shops closed their doors for half an hour to express solidarity. At Tarbes, where 80 percent of the staff of 776 are to be made redundant on April 18, 400

people demonstrated demanding cancellation of the restructuring project. The same day it was revealed that in August 2002 government ministers had agreed to raise the annual salary of GIAT boss, Luc Vigneron, by 50,000 euro to 330,000 per annum.

UK train guards to hold further strikes over job description

Train guards employed at 12 rail companies will strike for 48 hours on May 6, and again on May 27 in their ongoing campaign to restore the full safety role of train guards.

The rail firms to be struck are Arriva Trains Merseyside, Central Trains, Connex South Eastern, Govia South Central, Midland Mainline, Scotrail, Silverlink, Thames Trains, Virgin West Coast, Virgin Cross Country, Wales and Borders and Wessex Trains.

RMT rail union leader Bob Crow said, "This is a dispute about safety, pure and simple. The guard's role has been watered down and it needs to be restored to the rule book in full."

German rail union calls off strike after court injunction

A court injunction has been served on and accepted by the German train drivers' union GDL, which then called of a strike due to be held later this week. The stoppage would have involved 11,000 train drivers in a dispute with Deutsche Bahn over wages and job security benefits.

On April 21 the GDL announced that they had received a last-minute injunction from a Frankfurt court banning any rail strike after the Easter holiday. The union initially said that it would appeal the decision to a higher court but on April 22 announced that it had accepted the injunction and the strike would be cancelled.

Israeli labour union staff strike over pay

Staff working for Histadrut, the Israeli trade union

body, went on strike last week in protest over nonpayment of their March wages. The Histadrut workers are usually paid on the first of the month, but due to the federation's mounting financial problems staff have been paid on the ninth of the month for the past year-and-a-half. (According to law, workers must be paid by the tenth of the month for the previous month's employment).

Histadrut has accumulated a debt of NIS1.4 billion, causing most of its realisable assets to be sold and many real estate properties hived off to creditor banks. This cash crisis has meant that Histadrut has yet to honour its March payroll.

The union body initially proposed laying off 200 out of its 1,000 employees and cutting the salaries of the remaining workers. But the plan has been held up in the National Labour Court, since workers have applied for a temporary injunction against the dismissals.

On April 13 Histadrut workers' committee chair Bracha Siegelman called on the leadership to drop its plan and proposed alternative cutbacks. Siegelman suggested that the Histadrut halve its political contributions from NIS13 million to NIS6 million, stop employing pensioners and significantly reduce its activities.

Histadrut Managing Director Sami Ben-Yaish appeared before the workers last week and claimed the wages of senior workers had already been reduced, and that "even the office paperwork had been cut." He assured staff that the federation management is taking "every possible step" to raise the funds to pay wages.

Namibian textile workers strike against low pay

Around 3,000 textile workers at a factory in Namibia owned by Ramatex went on strike April 15 to demand a pay increase. The company immediately locked out the employees until April 28.

Ramatex CEO Albert Lim attacked the strike as the work of "problematic, hardcore, troublemaker employees." Police were called on the first day of the strike, forcing workers to leave the premises.

Some of the trainees at the factory are paid a basic monthly salary of only \$N300 (\$US41). This can rise to \$N585 after training and experience, working a nine-hour shift, five days a week. Supervisors are paid a basic wage of \$N787.

The strikers want a basic salary of \$N750 for trainees. In addition to a salary increase, the workers are

demanding improvements in their conditions of service, including allowances for transport, housing and medical aid. The company currently offers no such allowances.

The local union called in Namibian Food and Allied Workers' Union general secretary Cuana Angula, but his opposition to the unofficial action only inflamed the strikers' anger. One union member told the media, "We called Cuana [Angula] but they screamed at him. They even wanted to beat him [because] he said it was an illegal strike. He said we have to follow the procedures, but the workers didn't want to go back."

South African farm workers sacked for opposing wage cuts

Some 2,400 farm workers were recently fired by ZZ2, one of the world's largest producers of tomatoes, for taking strike action. The workers deny they had struck, saying that they had only confronted the owner after he made "unreasonable" deductions from their salary. They accuse the company of offsetting their wage increases—mandated by new labour regulations—with deductions. Regulations now demand agricultural firms pay their employees a minimum wage of R650 (\$US88) a month.

Mojeremane Manareng, 48, is one of those fired by ZZ2. He showed a recent salary slip to the media revealing his wage to be R460. ZZ2 had deducted R260 for a one-room flat, equivalent to 56.5 percent of his wage. South African legislation supposedly limits the proportion farmers can deduct from a labourer's wage for accommodation and food to 20 percent.

Manareng told the *Sunday Times*, "It is not true that we went on strike. We never did. They say we are paying for the toilets and house we live in. They say we also pay for the children's school fees, even though our children do not go to school on the farm."

The South African Agricultural Plantation and Allied Workers' Union have applied to the Labour Court in Johannesburg to have the workers temporarily reinstated pending the outcome of a Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration hearing.



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