

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

2 May 2003

Postal workers in Portugal strike against restructuring plans

Postal workers in Portugal are striking from April 30 to May 2 to protest against plans to reduce staff and privatise some services. The workers are members of the postal workers' union SNTCT that represents 17,000 postal workers.

As a result of a national holiday in Portugal on May 1, normal postal services will resume on May 5.

The CTT postal service states that the job losses will come through early retirement and by not renewing temporary contracts. They also plan to cut the number of outlets they operate and to develop more joint ventures with the private sector.

The CTT operates about 1,000 postal offices across Portugal and employs 2,000 employees on temporary contracts. It is one of the largest employers in the country.

The union issued a statement saying the strike was in opposition to the, "the handing over of postal offices and services to the private sector, the reduction in staff levels and the elimination of benefits."

Rail union calls off guard strikes in UK

On April 30, the Rail Maritime and Transport Union called off two scheduled 48-hour strikes in the ongoing dispute regarding the safely role of train guards. The strikes were to be held on May 6-7 and 27-28. Three one-day strikes have already been held in the last two months.

The union announced the decision following talks with rail management in which it said, "substantial progress" had been made.

The dispute involves 12 train operators who have now agreed that the RMT should be included in consultations about changes to the industry's rulebook. The talks also agreed that the train drivers union, the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen, will also be consulted.

French postal workers strike in Paris

On April 28, postal workers in Paris took strike action. Some 45 percent of Paris postal staff participated in the strike in response to management plans to stop one of the two daily distributions of post. Workers fear this could lead to the loss of 1,000 jobs.

Workers at Alstom in France protest against job losses

The entrance of the Alstom factory at Saint-Ouen was

blocked on April 23 by workers who took strike action to protest against the dismissal of 105 of the 424 staff employed there. The strike included members of four trade unions.

Alstom has announced a cut of 2,800 of the 11,000 jobs in Europe, with 600 of its 2,300 French staff being made redundant at Belfort, La Courneuve and Levallois.

Patrick Kron, the new president of the indebted company, intends to restructure the firm's transport and distribution sector. Alstom employs some 35,000 workers all over the world.

At the La Courneuve power turbo systems plant in Paris, 300 jobs will be lost and several demonstrations have already taken place with further protests planned.

At Saint-Nazaire, where Alstom are constructing the Queen Mary 2 liner, subcontractors are employing mainly foreign workers under inhumane conditions. This situation has led to a number of strikes. In April there was a three-week strike of 25 Greek workers supported by other foreign national workers against the Greek sub-contractor Ippokampos over non-payment of wages for four months. In the course of that struggle Alstom ended its contract with Ippokampos and the workers had to return to Greece. As a result the workers got just 41 percent of their wages from Ippokampos. The law courts are to decide if Alstom has to pay the rest.

Telephone exchange workers in Paris strike against threat to jobs

Employees at the Paris telephone exchanges have been taking industrial action since April 20. The workers are protesting at 145 of 500 jobs being threatened by management plans.

French GIAT workers continue protests against redundancies

On April 26, 2,000 people demonstrated in the town of Tarbes to protest against redundancies at the GIAT defence company plant at Saint-Jean-de-Luz. GIAT plans to shed 80 percent of the 776 jobs there. On April 24, 150 GIAT workers forced their entry into the major's office at Toulouse, although the special CRS riot police tried to prevent them.

General strike in Israel by public sector workers

On April 30, 700,000 public sector workers began an indefinite strike in Israel to oppose government plans to cut jobs and wages. The strike resulted in the closure of nearly all public services, including rubbish collections. Ports, airports,

schools and universities were also hit by the action as were government offices. Workers at national parks and cultural sites participated in the strikes. TV and radio stations were hit with Radio Reshet Gimmel and IBA television forced off air. The 700,000 who participated represent 12 percent of Israel's population and a larger percentage of the total workforce.

The main trade union federation, Histadrut, called the industrial action following the 10 percent cuts across the board for ministry budgets introduced by Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Israel's parliament approved the 11 billion shekel (\$US2.4 billion; £1.5 billion) cuts package while the strike was taking place.

Under the plans up to one in 10 public sector jobs will be lost, pension conditions attacked and the retirement age raised. Netanyahu's proposals also include big cuts on welfare spending.

He stated that the cuts were necessary to confront the worst recession since Israel was founded 55-years ago: "The government's overdraft is growing and international banks have told us they will not give us more money (to finance it)."

He announced that the United States had made an offer of \$9 billion in loan guarantees conditional on the economic plan being implemented. Netanyahu's plan was approved by 56 to 46 and has to go through two more readings before becoming law.

Lockout of Namibian textile workers ends

The two-week lockout of strikers at the Ramatex textile factory ended on April 29. About six hundred of the 3,000 workforce reported for work, with the others due to start back over the next few days. The workers who went back first were from Factory B, where clothing is knitted, sewed and ironed for sale on the US market.

The company locked out the workforce on April 15 in response to an unofficial strike over wages. Wage talks are due to take place soon after the employees have all resumed work. They will take place under conditions in which the management have shown their willingness to escalate the dispute while the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (Nafau) has pressured the workers to end their strike.

Nafau has negotiated new contracts—the original version gave the Malaysian owners the right to hire and fire workers at will and did not comply with Namibian labour laws—which the returning strikers signed. The owners said they would dismiss the organisers of the unofficial strike without so much as a hearing, but have now agreed to the provisions of the Labour Act that stipulate that a hearing should be held first.

Ramatex is going ahead with the recruitment of a further 3,000 workers at Rhino Textiles, its subsidiary company, to expand the lucrative export business.

Workers at Ramatex earn as little as \$N300 (\$US41) a month for a nine-hour, five-day shift. They often have to walk long distances to the factory and there are no healthcare or other benefits.

Kenyan train drivers strike to demand pay rise

Train drivers in Kenya have gone on strike to demand payment of an agreed 25 percent salary award. The drivers said that Kenya Railways Corporation had failed to honour a salary award that was ruled on by the Industrial Court over seven years ago. Almost all railway freight services in the country have been brought to a halt with perishable goods worth millions of shillings piling up at Nakuru.

This is the second railway strike this year. In January, millions of shillings worth of perishable goods went to waste during a strike over delayed salaries. The strikers accused management of raising tensions further by recalling retired train drivers, in spite of the increased risk of accidents on the single-track system. Last year the same tactic was used against Kenyan air traffic controllers.

South African hospital workers protest

54 workers at Frere Hospital, East London, South Africa were arrested on charges of trespassing and kidnapping. They were accused of taking hostage the chief medical superintendent, a senior matron and two other members of staff.

Police took the workers away after they had locked the management for three hours in the hospital's boardroom. The 54 were later released but have been suspended from duty for allegedly participating in an illegal strike. Altogether 400 hospital workers were involved in the dispute, including sisters, nurses, clerks and porters, over non-payment of incentive bonuses that were promised in January.

Cameroon: trade union leaders imprisoned

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has protested to the Cameroon government concerning the arrest of Benoît Essiga, the President of CGT-liberté, and 14 of his colleagues on the evening of 23 April.

Only two months ago the Cameroon authorities agreed to release six trade unionists after international protests. The present arrests are apparently part of a campaign by the management of the Camrail railway company to break up the Rail Transport Union, of which Essiga is also the president.

The ICTU are concerned for the safety of the trade unionists given Cameroon's appalling human rights record and have demanded the government provide them with immediate access to lawyers.

ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder, in a letter to the government of Cameroon, said that the ICFTU saw these new arrests as "clear evidence that the authorities are conniving with the management of Camrail in their intensive harassment of trade unionists who are merely defending the interests of the workers they represent."



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