

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

4 July 2003

French art workers and performers strike

Over the past week many French art workers and performers employed in the theatre, TV and film industries have walked out in protest at new regulations covering their unemployment benefits. The workers are mainly temporary staff that perform in many of the summer festivals organised around the country.

The dispute arose following three smaller trade unions signing up to new welfare rules, reducing from 12 to eight the number of months artistic workers who often work sporadically can claim unemployment benefits in each year. This would result in workers having to work for 507 hours every eight months to qualify, rather than the same amount of hours every 12 months.

Current legislation, in place since 1969, requires the workers to have worked 507 hours per 12 months to get one year of reimbursement. Now the employers' organisations, Medef and others, are demanding staff work 507 hours every nine months in order to claim reimbursements for just six months. This would exclude 50 percent of the temporary workers from the current assurance system. The dispute has lasted for months and led to a series of strikes and demonstrations.

On June 26 demonstrations were held throughout the country. In Paris 8,500 demonstrated, 400 in Bordeaux, 100 in Caen, 2,500 in Marseille and 1,600 in Nantes. On the same day 300 cinematic artists accused Medef of "the blind logic" in a petition published by the *Liberation* newspaper. On the evening of June 27, dozens of temporary workers occupied the office of *Liberation* to protest against its coverage of the dispute.

On June 27, three minority unions that collectively represent less than 10 percent of the temporary workers signed an agreement with the employers' organisations. The CGT majority union demanded that the Ministry of Culture not accept the agreement.

On June 28 and 29 some 50 summer-festivals were disturbed by the spreading strike movement. The dance festival of Montpellier that normally runs until July 5 was halted by the strike as the festival itself came out in support of the strikers. A further dozen festivals including Aix-en-Provence, Marseille, Mans and Paris were cancelled. The technicians at the theatre of Chatelet, Paris, struck in solidarity and went to the Théâtre de la Ville, where they hindered a performance.

On June 28 several hundred people demonstrated at the ministry of Culture at Paris. At the Avignon "Palais des Papes", performances at the Lyon opera were interrupted and at Rouen the police evacuated demonstrating workers.

Other strikes were held on June 30. On July 2 a national day of strikes was held.

Workers also voted for a strike at the important festival of Avignon theatre, beginning on July 8. The tourist industry fears large losses mainly in the southern French regions due to the strike. The CGT has called for a general unlimited strike of the audiovisual sector and the cinemas beginning on July 8.

The theatre of Caen was occupied since June 27. On the morning of

June 30 police intervened and arrested some 120 workers. The same night 13 temporary workers were arrested at Caen.

The concert "Jazz at Vienne" in the town of Vienne was also interrupted and the "Jazz of Europe" at Tours was called off.

On June 30 organisers also decided to call off the Festival of Marseille. That evening Minister of Culture Jean-Jaques Aillagon announced that the minority agreement would be signed by the government.

Belgian rail strike to protest privatisation and job losses

Railway workers in Belgium held a one-day strike on June 30 that resulted in major disruption to national and international services. The action was called in a dispute over restructuring that would result in 10,000 employees losing their jobs by 2007.

The NMBS-SNCB railway company said that only by cutting jobs and privatising its freight division could it stay in business. It said the alternative was losses of around 10 billion euros (\$US11bn) by 2010.

During the strike high-speed Thalys trains between Brussels, Paris and Amsterdam and the Eurostar service between Brussels and London were the most severely hit. The Eurostar services were delayed in the northern French city of Lille, near the Belgian border. Trains from Germany were forced to halt at the town of Aachen, with passengers taking buses to Brussels.

It is estimated that some 700,000 passengers who regularly use scheduled train services had to find other modes of transport. The railway company announced that the industrial action would cost it 3 million euros (\$3.4m).

Miners in Serbia protest against privatisation

On July 1, 300 miners employed by the Serbian Electric Power Company demonstrated in front of the Energy and Mining Ministry in Belgrade. The demonstration was the latest action in a dispute that began on June 16 over the privatisation of a number of mines that have separated from Serbian Electric, which employs a total of 43,500 workers.

On the same day the ministry and the miners trade union continued negotiations. A union representative said that it was not a dispute between employers and workers: "I hope that the citizens will understand, because we are not fighting for our personal interests, but because selling out Serbian Electric would signal the collapse of Serbia".

The ministry issued a statement saying that two trade unions involved in the dispute at two other Serbian Electric subsidiaries had agreed to end strike action.

German IG Metall trade union calls off "failed" strikes

On June 28 the IG Metall trade union in Germany called off a four-week strike over working hours in the former Stalinist-controlled east, announcing that their strategy had "failed".

IG Metall called the strikes off following an all-night 16-hour long discussion with employers' organisations representing Volkswagen, BMW and other companies. Union leader Klaus Zwickel said, "The

bitter truth is that the strike has failed. We will have to find other ways.”

During the failed negotiations the employers had proposed that firms could set weekly hours of between 35 and 40 hours, depending on their financial situation. IG Metall had proposed a phased-in reduction to 35 hours by 2011.

Following the collapse of the talks a chief negotiator for some of the major employers in the region said that more discussions could take place and said of IG Metall, “We hope they will return to reality.”

Over the past month union members had struck at a number of firms including the auto manufacturers VW and BMW in the southeastern state of Saxony and the Berlin region. The premise for the action was to force employers to cut the working week in the eastern part of Germany from 38 hours to 35. This would have affected about 310,000 manufacturing workers in the east.

Employers rejected calls to decrease working hours on the basis that the productivity of labour was still lower in the east more than a decade after reunification and that the number of hours worked was a factor in attracting investment to Germany.

Police attack general strike in Nigeria

At least eight people have died and dozens have been injured in police attacks on a general strike in Nigeria. The strike began on June 30 in response to an increase of more than 50 percent in the price of petrol, kerosene and diesel fuel. Petrol prices have risen to 40 naira a litre (31 US cents a litre, \$US1.18 a gallon) from 26 naira (about 20 US cents).

President Obasanjo was re-elected in the April election, which is widely seen to have been rigged. He is pushing ahead with International Monetary Fund measures in the face of continued economic decline. The price rises result from ending government subsidies on imported oil products of some \$2 billion a year. Despite being the biggest oil exporter in West Africa, Nigeria’s income from oil—\$15 billion last year—gave very little benefit to ordinary Nigerians and the removal of these subsidies is a severe blow to a population living in dire poverty.

There has been overwhelming support for the indefinite strike called by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) despite a court ruling that declared the action illegal. By July 2 the strike had spread from the capital Abuja and the commercial centre Lagos to cities in the north and southeast of the country.

Police fired teargas and then live ammunition into the air after they failed to disperse a demonstration called in Abuja. According to a Reuters’ reporter who was present, “There was a big stampede. Market women were running in all directions and many people were injured.” Many demonstrators were brutally beaten by the police. Amongst those injured were the labour editor and a reporter from *Vanguard* newspaper, an Associated Press photographer and a member of the Research Department of the (NLC).

The NLC issued a statement saying that it “strongly protests the excessive force, including reckless use of firearms, employed by the police over the past two days of the general strike declared by the NLC on the increases in the prices of petroleum products.”

On July 1, police arrested at least 88 people including 17 labour leaders in Delta and Ondo states. In the southeastern oil city of Port Harcourt on July 2, riot police used tear gas and fired live rounds in the air against 3,000 university and high school students who had occupied a main street. In Abuja, demonstrators lit fires on the streets and set up no-go areas.

Multinational oil company headquarters in Lagos were closed after

Nigeria’s largest blue-collar oil workers’ union, NUPENG, joined in the strike. Workers at Chevron, Shell and other major industrial plants stayed away from work. The white-collar oil union said some of its members were also taking part.

Most ports, banks, shops and petrol stations have been kept closed. International and domestic airline flights ran hours late or not at all, after air traffic controllers joined the strike. Many students and school pupils returned home due to their teachers being on strike. In the northern city of Kaduna, government workers arrived at their offices on July 1 but refused to work. The government has warned civil servants that taking part in the strike could lead to their dismissal.

With most petrol stations closed, residents have been taking containers out with them to look for kerosene and petrol for their cars or domestic purposes.

In a speech that was cut short by police firing tear gas at those in attendance, NLC leader Adams Oshiomole said, “We don’t want a Nigeria where only the rich can survive. That’s why we will fight this battle to the bitter end.” However, the NLC has resumed talks with the government as of July 2 and has hinted that it was prepared to compromise on the price of fuel. “We are willing to concede some ground,” NLC Secretary General John Odah told Reuters. “When we arrive at a figure that we are comfortable with, we will call an NEC (National Executive Council) meeting and the action will be suspended.” The Nigerian government are under pressure to end the dispute before the scheduled visit of US President George Bush next week.

Kenya flower firms sack workers

One of Kenya’s main flower growers, Homegrown Kenya Limited, has sacked 2,400 employees. The retrenchment is significant because the government of President Mwai Kibaki had hoped for expansion in this main export area of the Kenyan economy. About 50,000 workers are involved in the horticulture industry and 25 percent of the European flower market is exported from Kenya. Sales last year expanded by 21 percent over the previous year.

The industry was hit by the decision of Britain to stop flights to Kenya because of concern over terrorist attacks, but the company say they are cutting production due to the appreciation of the Kenyan shilling making exports more expensive as well as poor infrastructure and costly and erratic power supply.

Francis Waweru of the Kenya Plantation and Agriculture Workers Union said the body would oppose the sackings until correct procedures were followed and the workers were paid their terminal benefits. In a sickening display of fawning before the government, he claimed that the flower industry had been hit by “unnecessary strikes” incited by human rights activists protesting the environmental hazards and poor treatment of workers in the industry. “Our appeal to the government is that all these non-governmental organisations claiming to be championing the workers plight in the flower industry should be investigated and action taken against them as the industry is one of the largest foreign earners for this country,” he said.



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