Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

25 July 2003

British Airways staff strikes against new swipecard system

On July 18, British Airways service staff took several hours of unofficial strike action resulting in the cancellation and delays of many flights at Heathrow Airport near London.

The BA ticket and baggage handlers took the action unofficially without the backing of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), Amicus and the GMB—in protest at a new swipecard entry system called Automated Time Recording that allows managers to monitor their working hours. They are concerned that the system, due to be introduced this week, could lead to staff being asked to leave work during quiet periods, and make up the hours at busier times.

The wildcat strike led to the cancellation of all domestic and European flights from Terminal One. Over the weekend 500 flights were cancelled and some 80,000 passengers were stranded. By July 22 passengers were still waiting for flights. It is estimated that the strikes have cost BA tens of millions of pounds.

On July 22, British Airways imposed the new clocking-on system on its staff from midday after they failed to reach a settlement with trade unions. Following this, the GMB general union announced that it might ballot its 900 members for industrial action. Amicus and the TGWU said meetings would be held with workers before any decision was taken on strike action. They called on workers to end all strikes until then.

Bus workers in Devon, England continue strike

The ongoing bus workers dispute in Devon, southern England is set to continue on July 25 with a further 96-hour strike. The Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) members are demanding an increase of 57 pence to bring their hourly pay to £6.50 and to retain their current working conditions. The drivers are employed by Stagecoach Devon. The RMT and the company met for talks earlier this week, before ending them without agreement on July 22.

Stagecoach had agreed to the increase on the condition that no further rise would be forthcoming until 2005 and the deal would start in August and not be backdated until May. The strike is affecting Stagecoach bus services in Torbay, Exeter and east Devon.

Temporary art workers and technicians continue protests in France

During the last week dozens of festivals in France were disturbed or blockaded by art workers and performers in their ongoing dispute over benefit entitlement. Many of these were in the south of France, such as Aix-en-Provence and Carhaix, and in Paris.

On July 20, in the region of Corrèges 100 demonstrating artists faced 1,000 policemen protecting President Jacques Chirac and his wife Bernadette, who were attending a concert.

Many of the workers face cuts in their unemployment benefit of up to 40 percent following a deal between two of the smaller unions and employers. The majority CGT union initially opposed the deal and called for strike action and demonstrations. The union has now made repeated appeals for "real negotiations" with the employers and a request to Chirac, to whom they wrote an open letter on July 19, to hinder passage of the Raffarin's government proposed undermining of social benefit entitlements.

Israeli postal workers fight closures

Post office workers began industrial action on July 14 in protest against the Israeli Postal Authority's refusal to reach an agreement with the postal agencies over commissions and a plan to close up to 50 of the existing 435 post offices.

Postal workers stopped certain services, such as signing forms and the cashing of cheques after bank opening hours. Meir Rosner, chairman of the postal agencies organisation, said, "The Postal Authority claims that the expected closures are to improve efficiency, but the fact is that we have contributed to the post's efficiency, as the agencies improve service to the public and save it commissions which it would otherwise pay to the bank branches."

Postal Authority Director General Yossi Shelley claimed that closing 50 postal agencies, in addition to the 13 closed this year (already resulting in the dismissal of 250 permanent staff and 150 temporary), would save the authority NIS20 million ($US4.5 million) annually.

Protesting single mothers told they cannot collect dole payments in Jerusalem

The single mothers who marched to the protest tent outside the Finance Ministry in Jerusalem last week to demonstrate against cuts in their welfare supplements have been told that they cannot collect their unemployment allowances as long as they remain in the capital, *Israel Radio* reported last week.

Deputy Industry and Trade Minister Michael Ratzon rejected a request by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel to grant an exception allowing nine of the protesters to collect their allowances in the capital, insisting that the law requires that recipients collect allowances in their hometowns.

One woman marching from Haifa to Jerusalem fainted near Beit Shemesh and was brought to Hadassa University Hospital-Mount Scopus. She was marching with three other women and a 12-year-

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old girl, who continued walking to the capital.

The Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labour plans a campaign to offer 100 jobs a day to single mothers. The ministry had already located some 2,000 potential jobs in the field of healthcare, and more than 1,000 positions in various projects.

Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu intends to implement a significant increase in the tax on the employment of foreign workers in households in order to replace them with unemployed single mothers. Speaking recently to the Knesset Finance Committee he said, "There will be many more work places if we deal a blow to the plague of the foreign workers...".

Journalists' union protests Iranian crackdown on press

On July 11 the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) called on the Iranian government to free 17 journalists currently in detention and demanded an investigation into police brutality that has left a Canadian journalist close to death. IFJ General Secretary Aidan White said, "There has been a series of brutal violations of journalists' rights, which must be stopped."

Security officers in civilian clothes arrested 54-year-old Canadian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi last month during widespread student protests. She allegedly took photos of a prison where many protesters were jailed. Kazemi later sustained injuries in the custody of the Iranian police in Tehran, suffering a brain haemorrhage. She has since been declared brain-dead and doctors in Tehran have advised Canadian diplomats the she will not recover. The Iranian government has so far declined to comment on the case.

In another attack, armed men in civilian clothes struck Peyman Pakmehr on July 2, just two hours after the journalist had given an interview to Radio FARDA (Radio Free Europe). Pakmehr previously worked for the daily *Nasim Sabah* and the weekly *Ahrar Tabriz*, both of which have now been closed down by the government.

Another journalist, Ensafali Hedayat, of the now-closed daily *Salam* was arrested during a recent demonstration in Tabriz University, and was not given food for three days. He was accused of distributing propaganda against the Iranian government. Several other journalists have been beaten, arrested and imprisoned since the beginning of June.

Nigerian medical support staff to strike

An indefinite strike of junior health workers is due to begin today (July 25). The national action is to demand the Federal Government pay the 18 months arrears of professional allowances.

The Medical and Health Workers Union of Nigeria (MHWUN) issued a 21-day ultimatum of strike action to the Federal Ministry of Health on July 4. Hakeem Oseni of MHWUN said the strike decision was taken following several fruitless representations to government. The union claims that the government has been making money available to pay the allowances since 2002.

Oseni told the *Daily Champion* (Lagos), "Between January 2002 and December 2002, the sum of N180 million ($US1.3 million) was paid by the Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Health for the payment of health professional allowances to its officers, till today not a single kobo has been paid."

According to the *Daily Champion*, thousands of health workers stormed an MHWUN rally held in the Central Medical Laboratory, Yaba, on July 21. The workers carried placards demanding, "Two years arrears, pay up now," "Haba, N180 million released, yet..." and "Where is our money?"

Zambian health workers strike for housing allowance

On July 21, health workers, including nurses and paramedical staff went on strike at Ndola Central and Arthur Davison hospitals. They are demanding payment of a 40 percent housing allowance.

The workers met in the central hospital cafeteria and unanimously resolved to stay away from work until the housing allowance was paid in full, backdated to April last year. Health Minister Brian Chituwo promised the allowance in February.

Junior doctors at the two hospitals are also taking industrial action, refusing to carry out on-call duties until they are paid their June and July on-call allowances. At present trainee nurses are staffing the wards.

Zimbabwean Gramma workers suspended for striking

Two hundred workers at Gramma Records and the Zimbabwe Music Corporation, the two largest record companies in Zimbabwe, have been on strike since July 18 in support of a demand for higher wages. The strikers are also demanding the immediate resignation of Allan Wilson, the managing director of both companies, and supervisor Nicholas Kututwa.

On July 21, all the strikers were issued with suspension letters instructing them to attend disciplinary hearings the following day. The letter, which was signed by Wilson, claimed the strike was an "unlawful collective job action as defined by the Labour Relations Act" and that some of the workers were guilty of "engaging in or inciting a group of persons to engage in violent behaviour or obstructing other employees in the execution of their lawful duties." The strikers have declared that they will not submit to "such clearly intimidating tactics."

The strikers are pressing for a minimum wage of $250,000 ($US308) per month, up from the present rate of $47,000. Management is prepared to offer a settlement that will see the least paid getting a gross salary of about $65,000. A member of the workers' committee who refused to be named for fear of victimisation said, "In the past three months the accounts department made $500 million in profit yet the workers and the musicians are being paid peanuts."

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