

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

22 August 2003

## **Chemical workers in England strike over pensions**

On August 16, workers employed by chemicals company Rhodia in Widnes, Cheshire, and Oldbury in the West Midlands began a rolling programme of strike action. They are striking in defence of their final salary pension scheme. The company is planning to end the scheme for new recruits.

The workers are members of the Amicus and GMB trade unions. The strikes were called following the breakdown of negotiations at arbitration service ACAS last week.

The dispute highlights the attacks on pension rights being made by companies in the UK. Last year, the number of complaints to the pensions ombudsman increased by a third. Many of these complaints follow changes to final salary scheme rules.

## **North Sea oil workers threaten to strike in opposition to pay cuts**

Oil workers in the North Sea have threatened to take strike action to protest plans to cut their wages. The Wood Group energy company plans to slash the wages of 120 offshore workers by paying them at an hourly rate instead of daily. Workers fear this could cut their wages by up to £40 a day.

## **Workers at UK's Aston Martin car plant walk out**

Workers at two plants owned by luxury car maker Aston Martin held their second walkout from midday Thursday, August 14, through to Friday, August 15.

The 400 workers at sites at Newport Pagnell and Bloxham are protesting changes to their shift patterns—what they had described as Martini shifts, as it would mean them working “anytime, any place, anywhere.” On August 8, the workers staged a three-hour stoppage—the first in the company’s history.

## **Hospital workers in Plymouth, England, to ballot for strike**

Support staff at Derriford Hospital in Plymouth, the largest hospital in the southwest of England, are balloting

for strike action.

The workers, employed by contractors ISS Mediclean to clean wards and feed patients, say that a staffing crisis is putting patients at risk. Wards are left uncleaned as they struggle to provide food for Derriford’s 900 patients.

## **UK postal workers to ballot for strike**

The Communication Workers’ Union (CWU) stated it is making preparations to ballot postal workers for strike action. The union said ballot papers will be sent to 160,000 postal workers at the end of this week unless Royal Mail employers begin fresh talks.

Earlier, the CWU rejected a pay offer from Royal Mail, said to represent a 14.5 percent increase over 18 months. The union said the only guaranteed rise in the proposal was for a 3 percent increase from October, followed by just 1.5 percent next April. The deal is also said to be tied in with the loss of 30,000 jobs.

If the strike ballot is successful, it will be the first national postal workers strike in seven years.

## **Austrian pilots stage two-hour strike**

Pilots employed by Austrian Airlines held a two-hour warning strike on Thursday, August 14, to protest cost-cutting measures affecting 25 flights.

The action followed months of dispute between management and the staff council over proposed cuts, including a 40 percent cut in salaries for starting pilots.

## **Canning workers strike in Israel against job losses**

Employees at the Pri Galil canning plant in Israel began indefinite strike action on August 20. Some 400 workers were involved in the action. Demonstrators at the Mahanaim junction blocked the intersection.

The industrial action was in response to the 3i (Investment in Israel) group that owns the plant, who announced that they are going to sack 45 workers. The workers have been selected on the basis that they are “temporary” staff, even though they have worked at the plant for years.

Before this, management and the workers committee

had negotiated over a new work contract with the committee agreeing to concessions. Management also demanded that the agreement include 45 layoffs.

The Histadrut (General Federation of Labour in Israel) stated that the job losses had been announced to enable the firm to begin employing agency workers.

### **South African municipal workers strike to defend conditions**

Nine hundred members of the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU), at Mpumalanga's Govan Mbeki municipality in South Africa, took strike action on August 18 to protest attacks on their conditions. These include cuts in travel allowances and off-days and the shortening of lunch times.

The strike involves the six townships of the Govan Mbeki municipality—Bethal, Leandra, Trichardt, Evander, Kinross and Embalenhle. It has left the departments of sanitation, water supply, garbage removal, electricity and grave-digging without cover.

SAMWU's provincial chairman Wycliff Mabusela told the *African Eye News Service* (Nelspruit) that there had been no consultation. The municipal authorities had decided to stop giving travel allowances, reduced the lunch hour to 30 minutes, and deprived the labourers of one Friday off each month. He said, "The workers' situation is becoming worse than before."

Govan Mbeki's acting municipal manager Dominic Nyokane responded that the strike was illegal and that workers should have used the proper labour forum to lodge their complaints. Nyokane claimed the authorities were combining the six towns' municipalities in order to come up with uniform employment conditions. "We inherited the Friday-off issue from the old apartheid system, for instance. Now we employ people to work from Monday to Friday and that's why we decided to do away with it."

He told Nelspruit that the travel allowance was introduced for workers who were expected to travel to other towns for skills sharing, but that this had been phased out because those workers had been permanently placed in the various towns.

### **Johnson Matthey wage strike called off**

The strike of 700 workers employed by Johnson Matthey at Germiston near Johannesburg has been called off. The strike was resumed on August 13 after having been suspended for negotiations to take place. But production returned to normal on August 19, with both sides claiming victory.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa

(NUMSA) claims that the final settlement of 12 percent wage increase is only 1 percent less than the original 13 percent demanded by the strikers. However, a company spokesman has claimed that it amounts to an average of 11.5 percent.

### **Botswana teachers plan programme of action**

Botswana teachers' organisations are planning to hold a "peaceful demonstration" on September 9 to deliver a petition to the Office of the President demanding better conditions. The organisations agreed to lobby the civil service, politicians and traditional leaders to win the battle against the government. If the petition campaign is not successful, they will call a national strike.

Botswana Federation of Secondary School Teachers (BOFESETE) vice-president Eric Ditau claims that teachers will resign en masse if the strike does not get the desired results. He said, "The storm is building up and quickly for the government to notice. The Mogae regime defies the course of nature. It does not care about the education system in this country because the children who will be adversely affected belong to underprivileged members of our society, while children of politicians and top civil servants go to elite private schools with conducive working conditions for teachers."

Ditau added that the teachers' campaign will include other disadvantaged workers, who, according to the recently released report by Industrial Court judge David De Villiers, continue to be marginalised in terms of salary packages. "The De Villiers report does not only disadvantage teachers, but everyone below the D1 scale and for this reason, we need to fight as a united force. We don't see any good reason why school heads this time would not support our course because they, too, have been negatively affected looking at the report. In addition, we hope to take on board Botswana Mining Workers Union (BMWU), Botswana Unified Local Government Service Association (BULGSA) and Botswana Civil Service Association (BCSA)," said Ditau.



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