

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

5 September 2003

## UK postal union plans lightning strikes

Postal union leaders are planning a series of short, targeted stoppages of mail deliveries if their members vote for strike action in the pay dispute with the Royal Mail.

The Communication Workers' Union (CWU) leadership said it wants to "maximise" the impact of strike action while "minimising" the potential for long-term damage to Royal Mail.

Last week 160,000 CWU members received ballot papers, and the strike vote result will be known on September 17. Union sources and independent observers agree that a vote to strike is almost inevitable. But a long-term national stoppage is unlikely, as it would trigger provisions that lift restrictions on competition with Royal Mail by other licensed operators for up to three months, and could lead to intervention by government ministers.

Regulations in licences held by competitors, of which there are currently four, state that if three major mail centres are closed by strikes, restrictions on their activities would be raised.

A senior CWU source made clear his loyalty to the company's profit drive when he said, "We don't want to damage the service, and industrial action would be a last resort. But it would be a series of one-day stoppages. Stoppages could occur in different parts of the country or different functions—a mail centre one day, and deliveries the next—to disrupt the mail flow for longer periods than just a day."

Last week talks between the CWU and Royal Mail collapsed. The CWU asked for an 8 percent increase with no strings attached. RM's offer is for only 4.5 percent, with another 10 percent dependent on productivity targets.

## UK strikes on the increase

The number of British firms affected by strike action has nearly doubled in the past year, according to a new survey.

The poll of 370 employers and 22 trade unions was carried out by law firm DLA. It suggests that one in five businesses were affected by strikes in the year to July, nearly twice as many as in the previous 12 months.

DLA said the survey pointed to a sharp deterioration in industrial relations, with pay, working conditions and job security the most common causes of industrial action. Half of the employers surveyed said they expected more industrial unrest over the next year, with recently privatised companies the most pessimistic.

Mark Leach, co-author of the survey, concluded; "With a call by certain trade union leaders for coordinated action and days of protest, it is possible that we will see a greater intensity to strike action in relation to issues such as pay, pensions and public sector reform."

Employers also said they were not confident that managers and unions would be able to work in a more "open and constructive way" and few had the skills to "handle" industrial disputes.

## Edinburgh's secret ballot in bins dispute

A secret ballot of 350 binmen is to be held in an attempt to end the work-to-rule protest which has left rubbish piling up on the streets of Scotland's capital city. Bins have not been emptied for up to a week in some parts.

Rubbish has been left piling up beside full wheelie bins in badly hit areas including Newington, The Inch and Seafield.

The dispute began nearly three weeks ago over the number of holidays the waste disposal workers were allowed. The workers say that the council has reneged on an agreement to let them take their full complement of public holidays. Council leaders have organised the ballot after claiming many city binmen were "intimidated" into voting against a settlement offered last week.

The binmen in fact overwhelmingly rejected the "goodwill" offer at a meeting. The local authority had offered them a one-day holiday on September 15 in return for ending their work-to-rule action while management held talks with the unions. Council chiefs claim the voting method, which saw staff having to split into two groups at each side of the meeting room, left many workers afraid to go against militants pushing for the protest to continue.

Ballot slips have been sent out along with letters asking disposal workers if they support the offer they previously rejected. The letters point out that "not all staff were present" at the meeting. The letters have gone out with the backing of the Transport and General Workers' Union, by far the biggest union in the department.

The move has been met with anger and suspicion by some of the binmen. One worker said, "I think maybe 60 or 70 percent of the men are just returning them blank."

Many staff were unhappy that the ballot papers asked binmen which union they were attached to, this being seen as an attempt to split the workforce by pitching unionists against non-union members.

## Bus strike in York, England

A four-day strike by bus drivers in the city of York will start on September 6. Drivers at the First Bus company have rejected the latest pay offer in their claim for an £8-per-hour deal. A one-day stoppage by the members of the Transport and General Workers' Union on August 27 was the first in a series of strike dates in pursuit of the pay claim.

York's transport planning team has been in touch with schools to let them know which buses used by their pupils will be running during the action, including home-to-school services.

## Dublin Hospital closer to strike action

Strike action appears closer in Dublin hospitals which deal with disability. A dispute between the Eastern Regional Health Authority and the Department of Health over a pay agreement has forced hospital workers to hold a ballot this week.

The hospitals involved are Peamount, St. Ita's, Cheeverstown, St. Michael's, The Ashling and Stewart's. SIPTU Branch Secretary, Paul Bell, says his members are likely to go on strike because the Department of Health is refusing to pay up.

## Spanish oil refinery workers threaten strike action

Around 1,500 subcontracted workers at Spanish oil company Repsol YPF have said they will go on strike unless the company agrees to new safety measures after a refinery fire last month that killed six people.

The 140,000-barrel-a-day Puertollano refinery was hit by an explosion

and fire affecting seven gasoline storage tanks on August 14. The UGT trade union said in a statement: "This incident has uncovered shortcomings in resources, organisation and information."

Repsol's subcontracted workers plan to strike indefinitely unless the firm agrees to a series of safety measures ranging from training to better infrastructure for accident prevention.

Repsol, one of the world's top 10 oil firms, said the refinery was equipped to deal with this type of emergency but it was studying the workers' recommendations. Local media reported that firemen had criticised the company in a study for deficiencies in coordination and resources but Repsol said it had not received such a report.

Some 950 Repsol employees are carrying out maintenance work at the refinery, which accounts for 19 percent of the company's production in Spain. Repsol had previously planned to close the Puertollano plant for a month-long turnaround from the start of September, but is considering bringing forward the maintenance work to coincide with the shutdown.

Before the fire, Repsol had large amounts of fuel stored in preparation for the planned maintenance work at Puertollano. It is estimated that just over 8,000 of the 520,000 cubic metres of stored fuel was affected by the incident.

### **Bulgarian trade unions start strike wave against discredited government**

From September 1 the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB) has proclaimed the start of a mass strike wave to run throughout autumn and winter of 2003. The first regional protest rally has been scheduled for September 23 in the town of Stara Zagora.

The strikes are in response to a growing level of disillusionment with the government of Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg as it approaches 800 days in office. This date is significant because Saxe-Coburg promised during his pre-election campaign to bring a significant improvement in the quality of Bulgarians' lives "within 800 days."

Recent opinion polls show that 76 percent of the Bulgarians express disapproval with the government's work as compared to just 12 percent at the beginning of its tenure two years ago.

Talking to local NET radio, CITUB leader Zhelyazko Hristov stressed that people have been robbed of their illusions about higher living standards and a new morality in Bulgaria's political life and they no longer trust the prime minister.

### **Czech teachers ready to toughen struggle for higher salaries**

Teachers across the Czech Republic struck for several hours on September 1. This initial action is considered as a warning to highlight the situation of teachers and the education system to the government.

Many are now waiting to hear the position of politicians, but they also say that if need be, they would not hesitate and proceed to tougher forms of protest.

The deputy chairman of education trade union Jiri Valenta said: "We have not yet toughened our stance, we have been decent. We hope that the government will not confuse our decency with weakness."

Teachers said earlier that they could launch a much longer strike, which would cripple the educational system. Teachers' union leader Frantisek Dobsik said that further steps would hinge on the government's policy. The government is due to discuss the budget for next year later this week.

The teachers want their 13th and 14th extra monthly salaries to be fully preserved and their pay to exceed the country's average wage (about 17,000 crowns [\$US569]) by 30 percent at least.

### **Turkish public sector workers set to go on hunger strike**

Turkish Public Workers' Labour Union (Kamu-Sen) Chairman Bircan Akyildiz and the chairmen of ten other labour unions started a hunger-strike on August 30 in Abdi Ipekci Park after negotiations with the government broke down. They are set to be followed by around 5,000 workers.

Akyildiz said the government offered an increase of only TL160 million

(\$US114) in wages: "The government means to say 'Take this money and shut up' but this amount is unacceptable.

"We have TL420 million to receive for six months from the beginning of July. We accepted their offer of TL160 million on the condition of an increase in rent allowances. But, after the negotiations the government came up with an offer of a six percent increase in the first and second six months plus one percent welfare share. This means that political power could not get rid of the IMF and World Bank pressures."

Akyildiz stated that they wanted to warn the government and the hunger-strike of nearly 5,000 people from 70 cities will continue until a compromise is reached.

"Public workers demanding rights and increase in wages to lead a decent life will react tough against the ill treatment of the government," said Kamu-Sen Kayseri Representative Unal Polat, starting a hunger-strike with 35 union administrators at Meydan Park in Kayseri. Polat said that 100 unionists will participate in the strike in Kayseri.

Kamu-Sen Nevsehir Representative Mustafa Ugur and nine other union administrators who participated in the strike said the government's increase was not enough for public workers to survive. Ugur said that 34 unionists from Nevsehir will be on strike. Kamu-Sen's Adana Representative Ismail Koncuk stated that they had begun a hunger-strike with 100 participants.

### **US occupation forces suppress unemployed Iraqi demonstrators**

On July 29, US occupation forces in Iraq arrested Kacem Madi, along with 20 other members of the Union of the Unemployed.

The unionists had been conducting a sit-in to protest the treatment of unemployed Iraqi workers by the US occupation authority, and the fact that contracts for work rebuilding the country have been given overwhelmingly to US corporations.

Their protest started when hundreds of unemployed workers gathered in front of an old bank building on Abu Nawas Street. From there they marched to the office of the ruling occupation council.

According to Zehira Houfani, a member of the Iraq Solidarity Project in Canada who witnessed the protest, workers in similar demonstrations in the past had normally dispersed at that point.

Madi told Houfani: "Each time the representatives of the occupation forces meet and discuss with us, promise to solve the problem, but each time their promises are not fulfilled and we are forced to take to the streets again."

On this occasion the unemployed workers decided to set up a tent encampment outside the council gates. US soldiers on guard ordered them to disperse, but the workers refused. At one in the morning the soldiers returned, arrested 21 protesters, and took them inside the compound, where they were held until the following morning.

One arrested union member, 58-year old Ali Djaafari, told Houfani that the experience was "very humiliating. At no other time during the occupation has my resentment towards the US soldiers been that strong."

In Baghdad and most of Iraq's major cities, the unemployment rate is over 50 percent. Some estimate that four million Iraqi workers have no jobs. Thousands of public-sector workers employed by the former government lost their jobs after the war. Many provided services from healthcare to education, and those services have yet to be restored. There is no money to pay those workers, nor an Iraqi government to employ them. Even the records of their employment went up in flames in the looting which followed the occupation of Baghdad.

Thousands more worked in former government-owned enterprises. Many of those have been closed down, and occupation authorities have announced their intention to privatise huge sections of the former economy. That all adds up to thousands of working families facing an extreme economic crisis. The new union for unemployed workers has become the fastest-growing, largest labour organisation in the country as a result.

### **Israeli civil rights groups protest expulsion of foreign workers**

Three prominent civil rights groups staged a demonstration at the Tel Aviv central bus station last week to protest the deportation of foreign workers and their families.

Members of Mesila (the Centre for Assistance and Information for the Foreign Community), Physicians for Human Rights and Kav Laoved (the worker's hotline) marched along the Neve Sha'anani Street carrying suitcases.

They held signs saying, "We too were immigrants," and chanted the slogan, "No to deportation of children; there is no illegal child."

The beginning of September marked the end of the immigration authority's declared period in which foreign workers could voluntarily disclose themselves to the immigration police for deportation from the country. As of September 1, the immigration police returned to its aggressive tracking activities to expose and deport illegal immigrants.

Sigal Rosen of Mesila said, "The immigration police catches and deports mothers of children and children who were born and raised in Israel, for whom Israeli society has been the centre of their existence. Eviction of this sort will cruelly tear apart these families' lives and their social ties."

Deportation orders apply to all children and families who are considered "illegal residents" with no exception and without consideration of their home country, their adjustment to Israeli life, their children's birth place and their ability to return to their homeland.

### **Public sector strike in Zambia continues**

The strike of public sector workers in Zambia has now continued for two weeks with no sign of a resolution. Workers took action after the Zambian government reneged on housing allowances it had agreed to in negotiations in March. The government has been instructed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) not to pay the award because it will overrun its budget.

A joint statement by the IMF and the government in July specifically targeted the "large projected overrun in the government wage bill and related allowances in 2003" and the IMF has withheld about \$US175 million due to Zambia. Other donors, including the United States and Japan, are also holding back funds. Government ministers have toured the country explaining the budget overrun to the 120,000-strong workforce and have followed with threats of mass sackings.

Charity Musamba, coordinator of Jubilee Zambia the debt relief NGO, attacked the IMF's "punishment" of Zambia, saying it would not solve the problem of budget overruns nor help the country's efforts to reduce poverty. She said, "The budget was overrun last year, the year before, etc.," but the IMF was now moving the goalposts because Zambia was about to reach the Highly-Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) scheme completion point in December when it would qualify for debt relief. "They are not punishing the government—it's the ordinary people who are suffering," she said.

### **Autoworkers strike in Nigeria**

Nearly 2,000 workers at Peugeot Automobile Nigeria (PAN) Limited in Kaduna have been on strike for more than a week over poor staff welfare, unpaid allowances and demands that the company secretary resign. They are also protesting the conversion of a severance package into a pension scheme that they suspect would never be paid out.

Management are accused of bungling a deal to produce 900 vehicles for COJA, the All Africa Games, due to take place in Nigeria in October. The contract has been won by BMW. Accusations are also being made that management has an ethnic bias, promoting staff from the Ibo south east of Nigeria above local Muslims.

After violent clashes between the workers and management at the beginning of the dispute, with armed police cordoning off the street outside the factory, all the employees have written letters of resignation and are threatening to tender them if their demands are not met. Normally

the company produces 20 cars a day and production of 180 cars has been lost due to the dispute.

### **South African steelworkers begin industrial action**

About 800 members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) began indefinite strike action this week at Columbus Stainless in Middelburg, Mpumalanga. NUMSA decided to take the action after Columbus unilaterally imposed a wage increase of between 4.5 percent and 16 percent that the union considered would mainly benefit a small group of workers on the top grades. The union submitted its own demands, including a 15 percent rise for all employees, a two-year wage agreement, reduction in the number of skill grades and the promotion of "black economic empowerment."



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