

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

12 September 2003

## UK's Royal Mail refuses talks to avert postal strike

Royal Mail has turned down the offer of further talks to avert the UK's first national postal strike in seven years, after rebutting a claim by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) that it had exaggerated financial losses to justify shedding 30,000 jobs and limiting pay increases for 160,000 staff.

CWU deputy leader Dave Ward alleged that the company's annual accounts, which showed a pre-tax loss of £611 million, included a £470 million exceptional charge for the cost of redundancies. But only 2,000 jobs at most had gone, compared with the 16,000 claimed by Royal Mail, and the core letters business had made a £66 million profit.

Ward, who is organising the strike ballot due to end on September 17, suggested that the real financial gap between the company and the union, which is claiming an up-front 8 percent pay rise, could be bridged and urged the Commons trade and industry committee to order an immediate inquiry into the group's accounts. "We have already held several informal talks with the management and are ready to meet them any time. We can put forward sensible solutions to this dispute which won't break the bank," he assured the company, offering the prospect of negotiations within the next few days.

Royal Mail insisted that the audited accounts gave a true picture of the losses. The bulk of the core letters business, officials said, had lost £480 million last year, while the £66 million commented upon by the CWU was almost entirely due to stamp sales and special letters delivery.

Postal workers insist that they are working excessive hours for low pay. Maureen Gleeson of Chislehurst, Kent, said that at 55 she was still having to do overtime to make ends meet and taking home £260 a week.

Angela Mulcahy, of east London said management had "run us into ruin," and Charlie Balch of Cardiff said it was "harder and harder to survive on the wages we earn. We have to work up to 80 hours a week to get a living wage."

## French teachers take to the streets

Around 4,000 teachers marched through the streets of Paris on September 10 before being blocked by the police at the gates of the Ministry of Education.

The call for the protest was issued by the Inter-union one, a coalition of six unions, to oppose "decentralisation," the reform of retirement regulations, and in defence of public services.

Along with the Inter-union one, protesters from South-Education and CNT joined in.

The unions say that by the end of the year, approximately 15,000 education assistants will be missing from the country's schools compared with the last school year.

Similar demonstrations and gatherings were organised in several other towns across France. In Marseilles, 1,000 teachers marched. "It is necessary to set out again. Colleagues are entirely mobilised on the same basis as in May and in June," said Josiane Dragoni, secretary of the SNES (national trade union of secondary education) for the Academy of Marseilles, referring to the last big strike wave.

In Lyon, there was a gathering of around 400 in front of the vice-chancellorship. In Rennes, between 250 and 300 demonstrating teachers took to the streets.

## French entertainment workers forecast strike action

CGT-Spectacle, the trade union representing actors and workers in the entertainment industry, announced on September 10 that it will launch a series of actions to force the withdrawal of newly passed legislation on casualisation of the workforce and unemployment insurance.

CGT secretary-general Jean Voirain said the union would organise "demonstrations, strikes, in all France, with a central aim, namely the withdrawal of the approval which was given on the reform of the unemployment insurance by the government on 6 August."

In an official statement, the CGT, which represents 100 city theatres mainly subsidised by the local authorities, said it "affirms its hostility" to the recently passed legislation.

Last September, CGT-Spectacle workers demonstrated against the reform of their unemployment insurance scheme. As more than 4,500 marched through the streets of Paris, some carried banners that quoted playwright Bertolt Brecht: "If you do not take part in the fight, you participate in its defeat."

## Walkout by Greek airport staff over government plan

Olympic Airways staff at Athens International stayed away from work September 4 in protest at Greek government plans to restructure the struggling airline. More than a dozen domestic and international flights—mostly transatlantic—were cancelled and others delayed because of crew shortages.

The protest by workers came less than a week after the government announced plans to relaunch the national flag carrier as a partially privatised company with a reduced workforce in order to pay off its debts.

Around 19,000 passengers were affected by the walkout. Many passengers stuck in huge lines at check-in counters chanted

“disgrace, disgrace.”

The national carrier’s main union cancelled strike plans after a court declared it illegal. But many workers countered by calling in sick or staying away. However, union officials have threatened industrial action in response to staff victimisation. “The board laid off 25 people [from those participating in the action], and when there are layoffs, there’s no way we sit tight,” said union official Vassilis Mourikis

The government says Olympic faces bankruptcy, with debts of around half a billion euros, unless it is overhauled. Two previous attempts at privatising the carrier have fallen through in the past two years after key bidders pulled out. The government is hoping that halving labour costs by reducing the company’s workforce to about 2,000 from 6,000 will attract potential buyers. The government hopes to relaunch the carrier before next year’s Olympic Games, to be held in Athens.

#### **Four-hour airways strike to hit Italy**

There will be a national strike for four hours (from 12 to 16) today, September 12, across Italy that will include air traffic controllers from the trade union Anpcat. This was announced by Enav, the Italian company for airline security services, which also stated that “the necessary services will be guaranteed according to current regulations.”

#### **Israeli Defence Forces civilian workers strike**

In an unprecedented move, some 500 civilian military employees at the Israel Defence Forces’ (IDF’s) Tsrifin base went on strike for two hours on September 4. Some decided to demonstrate opposite Defence Ministry headquarters in Tel Aviv.

The Defence Ministry has begun to merge Tsrifin’s rehabilitation and maintenance centre with a similar centre at the Tel Hashomer base. The Histadrut labour federation insists this violates agreements that the merger would not begin as long as talks were ongoing. The union said the planned 200 pink slips would result in negligible savings.

#### **University lecturers strike in Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe’s seven universities have failed to open this week, as lecturers demanded the government increase their salaries and improve working conditions. Those affected are the University of Zimbabwe (UZ), Chinhoyi University of Technology, Bindura University of Science Education, the Midlands State University and the National University of Science and Technology, Masvingo and the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). UZ put out a statement saying the 2003-2004 academic year was indefinitely postponed.

James Mahlaule, the acting president for the Association of University Teachers (AUT), said that the government was refusing to take their grievances seriously. Lecturers withheld the processing of examination marks for university students in the last academic year, leading to the failure of thousands of students to graduate.

A junior lecturer’s salary is currently Z\$218,000 (US\$274), and staff have been failing to report for work saying they could not afford the bus fare. The union is demanding a monthly salary of up to Z\$2.13 million (US\$2,676). Many Zimbabwe academics have now left for jobs in South Africa, Botswana, Europe and the United States.

#### **Angolan nurses take action**

Nurses in public hospitals in Luanda, the capital of Angola, went out on strike last week to demand a pay rise as well as payment of arrears. Only a small number of nurses remained on duty to cover emergency cases. Average current pay for nurses is US\$50 a month. “We chose to go on strike because our patience is at an end,” said Joao Ngola, secretary general of the nurses’ union.

Since Angola’s 27-years-long civil war ended last year, there has been a wave of strikes in the public sector. University lecturers took strike action in July for 45 days and only went back after the government pledged a salary increase. They have threatened to take action again if the government does not keep its promise.

#### **Zambian general strike called off**

Union leaders called off a strike by 120,000 public sector workers after two weeks. They are now pursuing the claim through the courts over the government breaking an agreement signed in April to pay a wage deal and a 40 percent increase in housing allowances.

Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) president Leonard Hikaumba justified the sellout with the claim, “Several innocent people, such as the sick or ill people, suffered because of the strike because even health workers...downed tools. That is why we decided to use other avenues to resolve our dispute with the government. The courts provide a better avenue, I think.”

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) told the government not to pay the wage and benefit increases as the latter has a projected budget over-expenditure that will reach US\$125 million by December 2003. The IMF and the World Bank withheld a total of US\$173 million balance of payments support in June. They are demanding the government tackle a budget deficit of around 3 percent of GDP, up from a previous forecast of 1.55 percent.

Zambian president Levy Mwanawasa, on a visit to Tanzania last month, told reporters that an “administrative slip” by government negotiators had led them to agree to the present deal in which public sector salaries would amount to 12 percent of gross domestic product instead of the 8 percent dictated by the IMF.



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