

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

19 September 2003

Poland's coal miners protest job losses

Coal miners protested in Poland on September 11 against proposed job cuts and pit closures. Some 8,000 miners assembled in the capital Warsaw. There were clashes with riot police during the demonstrations, resulting in the injury of 20 protesters. Police attacked the assembly with teargas, water cannon and rubber bullets.

The government of Prime Minister Leszek Miller plans to close 4 of 23 mines run by the state coal holding company Kompania Weglowa. The closures will result in the loss of 14,000 jobs or 10 percent of the coal industry workforce. This is in line with European Union legislation that stipulates that governments cannot subsidise loss-making state industries. Poland is to join the EU next year.

One of the demonstrators Piotr Wesoly said, "We have nothing to lose. If they sack us we have no place to go—and I have two kids and a wife to look after."

Deputy Economy Minister Irena Herbst said in response, "These protests will not change our resolve to restructure the coal sector."

Miners have now threatened take industrial action in order to keep the mines open.

Altadis workers in France strike against job losses

On September 15, hundreds of workers at cigarette-producer Altadis protested against the closure of the factory at Lille-Fives. The 456 workers and the regional management (69 employees) are set to lose their jobs by the year 2005.

They blocked the traffic outside the company headquarters. Later in the day there was a 24-hour strike at all French and Spanish factories of Altadis threatened by closure and mass dismissals. The CGT is the main trade union involved in the dispute.

Altadis made a profit of 220 euro million in the first six months of this year, an eight percent improvement on last year.

The Altadis workers were supported during their protests by the unemployed of the region. In 2003 more than 6,000 full-time workers were made unemployed and more than 20,000 people have lost sub contracting jobs in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region.

Security staff at Toulouse airport, France strike

Staff employed at the private security enterprise Securitas at Toulouse-Blagnac airport began strike action on September 15.

Some 230 workers are involved in the dispute and are demanding improvements in basic wages, bonuses and classifications. It is estimated that 85 percent participated in the strike. The CGT trade union organises most of the workers involved.

The action had a severe impact on departing flights and the workers decided in the evening to continue their action the next day. Only one of the eight boarding lounges was open, with only

20 percent of departures going ahead. Arrivals were unaffected.

Fujitsu workers in Manchester strike over pay

On September 16, 250 workers from IT firm Fujitsu in West Gorton, Manchester, took strike action in a dispute over pay and conditions. Fujitsu employs 850 workers at the site.

The staff are members of the Amicus union trade union, which has rejected the latest offer from the company.

Amicus states that up to one in three workers at the site are paid less than the company's minimum pay scales. The union said this week that it had initially been "close to agreement" with the company during talks earlier this month, but the firm's final offer was "unacceptable".

A spokesman from Amicus said, "Some of the workers at West Gorton are facing a second year without a pay rise. Some earn as little as £11,000-a-year."

Another half-day strike is due before the end of September if the dispute is not resolved.

Shipyard workers in Tyneside strike in support of subcontractors

Shipyard workers at three shipyards on Tyneside, northeast England walked off the job in unofficial action on September 15.

The dispute involving 2,000 workers was in support of subcontractors who have been excluded from pay agreements that apply to workers employed directly by the shipyards in the area.

At the Swan Hunter shipyard in Wallsend, North Tyneside, 800 employees struck. They were supported by around 1,000 staff at nearby AMEC and 40 from McNulty's in South Shields, South Tyneside.

UK postal workers reject national strike

Postal workers in the UK have voted by a slender margin to reject industrial action in a dispute over pay and conditions. The workers were balloted by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) with the result announced on September 17. In the ballot, 46,391 voted in favour of industrial action with 48,038 against—a majority of 1,647.

A national strike would have been the first such action in seven years.

Workers had rejected the latest offer from Royal Mail that included a number of draconian changes to working practises, as well as thousands of job losses, under the guise of a 14.5 percent pay rise over 18 months.

Some of these changes include:

An end to second delivery, resulting in a five-day week for all staff

The loss of 8,500 jobs on a voluntary basis

30,000 redundancies across the Royal Mail group, with 16,000 of those jobs gone already

Royal Mail is spending £340 million as part of this restructuring.

The CWU is calling for an eight percent pay rise in October, discussions on an end to second deliveries and new shift patterns, no fixed target for job-losses, agreements tailored to local post office needs and a shorter working week.

In a separate dispute, London-based Royal Mail workers voted in favour of a strike over “London weighting” for pay to account for the high cost of living in the capital. The ballot was 11,417 in favour of a strike and 4,316 against.

Zimbabwean government threatens striking university lecturers

A Zimbabwean government spokesman has accused striking lecturers at seven state universities of being politically motivated and seeking to make universities ungovernable. On September 16, Acting Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education Ignatius Chombo accused the strikers of being “bent on destabilisation” and has warned that the government “can’t sit idly while students suffer.”

The lecturers have been on strike since September 8 in support of their demand for increased salaries and better working conditions. In an attempt to settle the dispute, the government has offered a 400 percent salary increase. The striking lecturers have rejected the offer as totally inadequate in the rapidly deteriorating economic situation in the country with its astronomic rate of inflation. They are demanding an 896 percent increase.

Last week the Labour Court declared the strike illegal and ordered an immediate return to work. The Association of University Teachers is considering filing a notice of appeal against the ruling, which they claim would render the order ineffective.

South African miners strike called off

On September 17, more than 2,000 striking members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) took part in a 10-kilometre march from the Great Centenary Hall in New Brighton to the Port Elizabeth Chamber of Commerce. The purpose of the march was to present their demands for better wages and working conditions to the chief executive officer of South African Civil Engineering Contractors (SACEC).

The strike involved 6,000 provincial members of the NUM in support of demands made in annual negotiations with the South African Federation of Civil Engineering Contractors (SAFEC). The strike began on September 8 and one of the main demands was an increase of R500 on the minimum wage, bringing it up to R2,000 per month to take effect in September 2004.

Immediately after NUM regional chairman Tebatso Mokoeno had handed over the list of demands he received a call on his cell phone telling him the strike was over. The NUM had accepted the employers’ offer of an increase in the minimum wage from September 2005. The union had already accepted a 10 percent increase in wages for workers earning above the minimum. Mokoeno told *East Cape News* that when he got the phone call he “turned around and told the marchers... that the strike was over.”

He said, “We realised that the employers met most of our demands and we couldn’t stand on one demand. So we decided to call off the strike.” Reports have not given any indications of improvements in working conditions, as had been demanded by the strikers.

The NUM’s capitulation can only serve to create divisions between workers on the minimum wage and the higher paid. It happened at a time when the government was desperate to get the work restarted at the Coega Development Corporation (CDC) outside Port Elizabeth, which had been halted by the strike. The CDC is part of the government’s plans to open up South Africa to international investment. It is a deepwater port and part of a Duty-Free Industrial Development Zone.

National Ports Authority (NPA) spokesman Donald Kau told the *East Cape News* that they were concerned about the situation at the province’s multibillion rand project. “We have milestones and targets that we need to reach at the port. We need to make sure that we do not run behind the scheduled time.”

Cross River workers strike over nonpayment of salaries

Local government staff in Cross River State, Nigeria, have been on strike since the beginning of September in protest against the non-payment of their salary arrears for the past five to seven months.

According to the *Daily Trust*, the strike has not been organised by the National Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE), but “offices occupied by the bureaucrats in some of the councils have been deserted” In the majority of the council areas most offices were empty during normal working hours and “official activities have been virtually grounded... as stenographers and other staff have refused to show up for work in the past two weeks”.

The *Daily Trust* reported that the non-payment was “deliberate to allow government tidy up on the nominal roll of workers as well as conclude arrangement on the smart card of workers currently on course.” Governor Donald Duke has appealed to the workers to exercise patience as their arrears would be paid soon.



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