

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

18 October 2003

## **Council and postal workers strike over pay allowance in London**

On October 16, tens of thousands of local authority workers and postal workers took strike action. It was the latest strike in an ongoing campaign for an increase in the London Weighting (LW) living allowance, paid to public sector workers in the capital to compensate for the high cost of living. London is the most expensive city to live in Europe for housing and public transport.

The strike was held by the public service workers' trade union, Unison. A total of 139 schools were closed for the day, 17 special schools and 11 nursery schools. Many others closed for half the day or could not teach special needs pupils. Also closed were 35 libraries.

Later in the day, thousands of workers marched through central London and attended a rally.

Postal workers joined the action. Postal workers in inner London receive £3,282 in LW, while their colleagues in outer London get £2,038. The Communication Workers Union is calling for the abolition of this distinction, on the basis that house prices, childcare and transport costs are broadly equal across the London region. The Royal Mail has offered to increase LW by a paltry £300 a year.

## **Steelworkers in Serbia take industrial action in pay dispute**

Some 10,000 steelworkers employed by the United States Steel Corp. began two days of strike action on October 14 in a dispute over pay. The industrial action was held at the Smederevo steel works, Sabac tin plant and Kucevo quicklime factory.

Trade union leader Mileta Gujanicic estimated that the strike had cost the firm daily losses of more than half a million dollars. According to Gujanicic the average monthly wage of a steelworker employed by United States Steel Corp. was 9,205 dinars (\$159) per month. This is 10 percent below Serbia's average.

Gujanicic added, "We demand US Steel increase to 55 dinars from 33 dinars the hourly wage, which is still well below what US Steel workers get in other countries."

Last month, the US-based company acquired the state-owned steel facility Sartid and six subsidiary plants for \$23 million and plans to invest \$150 million to upgrade the

facilities over three years.

## **Austrian airline staff strike against cost-cutting**

Pilots and flight staff at Austrian Airlines (AUA) held a 15-hour strike on October 12 in opposition to cost-cutting plans by management. The 470 pilots and 1,370 flight personnel had initially voted unanimously to take action following a breakdown in several months of negotiations between AUA management and trade unions.

The action resulted in the cancellation of eight flights and a loss of up to 2 million euros (\$2.4 million) for AUA. The firm transferred many of its passengers onto flights on its subsidiaries Lauda Air and Austrian Arrows once the stoppage was under way.

Trade union representatives claimed that the dispute was not resolved, with one official stating, "The strike is not over, it has only been interrupted. We will strike again without warning." In August, the pilots and flight personnel held a three-hour strike.

The AUA is attempting to introduce a restructuring plan to slash costs by 10 percent by 2004 and 35 percent by 2008. The company announced a first-quarter loss of \$62.8 million before taxes, in early May.

## **Railway workers in Italy strike in contract dispute**

Italian railway workers held a 24-hour strike on October 13 in a contract dispute with the national rail company Trenitalia. The action was called by a number transport unions representing 20 percent of Italy's 100,000 railway workers but did not involve the three largest labour federations. Among the workers protesting were stationmasters, conductors, and engineers.

The firm said most of its trains ran as scheduled, and that 16.5 percent of its workers had participated in the strike.

## **Ford auto workers in Belgium strike**

Steelworkers in Genk, Belgium, struck the Ford Motor Company on October 10 for the second time in a week to protest the firm's plan to axe 3,000 jobs and cancel investment. Ford intends to cut costs and investment to the value of \$1.05 billion at the plant.

The strike followed media rumours that the plant would close entirely over the next few years, with the loss of all 8,300 jobs.

In the days leading up to the latest strike, workers reduced

their shift by two hours and blocked the gates to the plant. This resulted in parts being delayed and directly affected production.

The firm has issued a warning to workers that they would be asked to go home without pay if production levels were not normalised.

### **Hungarian medical staff protest at Ministry of Health**

Several hundred Hungarian doctors and medical workers demonstrated outside the Ministry of Health on October 9. The employees, members of the Democratic Union of Health Workers (EDDSZ), protested following the exclusion of the organisation from talks on a new medical bill.

In solidarity, the Chamber of Hungarian Doctors (MOK) refused to continue discussions with the ministry.

### **Six Nigerian trade union officials arrested**

Six officials of Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) were taken into custody in Abuja on October 13 and are being held incommunicado at Abuja Police Command Headquarters.

The NLC's senior assistant secretary, Linus Ukamba, was arrested along with five other officials—Nuhu Adebayo, James Enstace, Emma Udoh, E. Igiri and Innocent Ogwuche—as they picketed filling stations, which were selling petrol at above the official price of N34 per litre. This price was negotiated last week at what the *Daily Champion* (Lagos) described as “a crucial stakeholders meeting in Abuja among governors, major market makers, top government officials and others to stave off an imminent nationwide strike over a fuel price hike.”

An indefinite general strike had been called by the NLC to protest against government deregulation of the price of petroleum products, which resulted in an overnight increase of 15 percent in fuel prices on October 1.

The whole country was preparing for the strike, which was to have begun on October 9. Large queues had formed at shops, banks and petrol stations as people bought in provisions. At the last minute, the strike was called off by the NLC after an agreement to revert to previous oil prices was cobbled together with oil marketing companies.

As soon as the action was abandoned, President Olusegun Obasango attacked the NLC in a nationwide address, accusing them of attempting to form a parallel government—of engaging in a “series of subversive activities...misrepresenting government policies...and using every opportunity to blackmail the government.”

The six NLC officials have been accused of conspiracy, criminal breach of public peace, trespass, obstruction, incitement and disturbance of public order. According to the *Daily Trust* (Abuja), the court was told that the NLC officials had conspired on October 13 without lawful justification, to force themselves into the premises of Total

Petroleum Station, AP Petrol Station, Texaco and Muir Service Station, in Abuja, and obstructed sales of petroleum products and operation of pump machine, “and therefore caused commotion and conduct likely to cause a breach of peace, punishable under sections 97, 145, 348 and 114 of penal code.”

The assistant superintendent of police told the court that the accused could only be granted bail on the orders of President Obasanjo. They have been remanded in prison custody until October 20.

The strike call was supported by the vast majority of the Nigerian population, who have already been badly affected by a 54 percent petrol price hike that resulted in substantial increases in the cost of transport and food. Despite the strike being called off, sporadic action went ahead on October 9. Thousands of civil servants in the states of Lagos and Bayelsa stayed at home, public transport was curtailed and many of the country's main markets were closed.

Ever since he came power in 1999, Obasanjo has been trying to end all fuel subsidies to meet the demands of the IMF and World Bank. Earlier in the year, another attempt to deregulate fuel prices was only partially averted after a 10-day national strike.

Leaders of all of Nigeria's trade unions have condemned the arrest of the NLC officials. They described the action as the worsening evidence of militarisation and dictatorial governance in Nigeria. However, whilst insisting on the NLC's determination to continue with the protest action, NLC general secretary John Odah expressed his organisation's utmost respect for the judiciary, declaring that the NLC “will continue to uphold the legal framework which gives legitimacy to the current official prices. This is notwithstanding the complicity of the administration with marketers.”



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