Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

10 October 2003

Ford workers in Genk, Belgium, strike against job losses

On October 6, auto workers at Ford's plant in Genk, Belgium, struck for 24 hours in protest at the shedding of 3,000 jobs. Workers also blockaded deliveries to and from the plant.

The Genk factory previously manufactured the Focus model, but the company has now ended production of the model at the plant, resulting in the loss of almost one third of its 9,500 staff. The job losses are part of a restructuring by Ford that will see 12,000 job losses worldwide

Miners in Urals in underground occupation

Bauxite mines in Yekaterinburg in the Northern Urals in Russia began an underground occupation last week, demanding higher wages and lower output targets.

The 6,000 miners involved in the dispute are employed by the aluminium firm SUAL and began the action on October 1. The majority are on strike above ground.

Workers refused demands by management to end the dispute, with the deputy head of the regional independent miners' union, Alexander Anisimov, stating the occupation was a bargaining tool for negotiations. He said, "If the miners come to the surface, the action will lose half its bite and the owners will not be in a hurry to talk to us."

Italian monument staff strike against government reform

On October 2, staff at the Coliseum and Pompeii monuments closed the tourist attractions in a protest at the "unacceptable general condition of the Italian cultural heritage."

The strike was called by the Intesa trade unions. In a statement, the unions stated, "The Ministry is preparing a reform which, according to us, will provoke a further deadlock in the administrative and technical structure and will make the historical and artistic patrimony of our country the prey of sole economic interests."

Postal workers in London set to continue strike over pay

Postal workers in London are set to hold a second strike on October 16 in a dispute over pay. Last week, 25,000 postal staff, members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), held an initial strike in pursuit of a flat-rate rise in the London weighting allowance to £4,000 for each postal worker. London weighting is an extra payment that some workers receive to compensate for the higher cost of living in the capital.

The industrial action is estimated to have cost the Royal Mail up to £10 million in revenue. The Royal Mail has rejected the CWU demands, and instead offered to increase the inner-London allowance by £300 to £3,784 and the outer-London allowance by £300 to £2,667.

London local authority workers are also due to hold a stoppage the same day.

Two-day general strike in Mali

A two-day general strike paralysed economic life in the African state of Mali on October 6 and 7. The action, called by the National Union of Malian Workers (UNTM), was in protest against President Amadou Toumani Toure's failure to keep pledges made during the election campaign in April 2002. These include promises toincrease the minimum wage (average wages are currently US$44 per month), create a national programme of development of workers, and reduce the price of public utilities. UNTM's secretary-general Siaka Diakite said that most Malians could no longer afford water, electricity or telephones.

The strike shut down government offices, schools, businesses, telecommunications and the media. Thirty-eight of the country's daily and weekly newspapers failed to appear. Diakite threatened that workers were prepared to renew the strike action as many times as necessary until "all their demands are met." He warned of further action on October 24, to coincide with a state visit by French president Jacques Chirac if the union

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did not feel that “progress was being made.”

The UNTM was in negotiations with the government until late September in an effort to avert the strike. According to *allafrica.com*, behind-the-scenes negotiations continued while the strike was in progress. The government has promised to significantly reduce the price of water, electricity, telephone and medicines.

On October 8, a new dispute began that closed down the University of Mali and six other institutions, as 300 professors, lecturers and teachers took strike action. The strike, organised by the National Syndicate of Higher Learning (SYNESUP), was a “48-hour warning” to press the government to improve their living and teaching conditions. SYNESUP is demanding a new salary system, payment of salary arrears, implementation of all government decisions regarding teachers in the last three years and the creation of a commission to evaluate the promotion of teachers.

The union’s general secretary, Lansana Traore, told *IRIN*, “On top of our demands, we are concerned that the new classification system for promotions that was set up in 1992 is now outdated.” He said very few lecturers in the higher institutions of learning had moved up the professional ranks since 1992 because of the outdated classification system.

South African airport cleaners’ strike

Ninety cleaners at Cape Town International Airport took indefinite strike action on October 6 in support of their demand for a wage increase of R2.44 an hour and a 40 cent increase in night-shift allowance The strikers, members of the Transport and Omnibus Workers Union (TOWU), are responsible for cleaning aircrafts and terminals. They have been demonstrating outside the airport since the strike began.

One of the strikers, Portia Julius, told the *Cape Argus*, “We are not happy about the way things are being done. Management is not faithful and committed to resolving the impasse. They have let us down.”

Julius denounced management’s insistence that their current wages were more than enough for the work they were doing, adding that workers were obliged to strike because they were fighting for a living and had families to feed.

The strikers are claiming that they are expected to work overtime when flights are delayed and are often left without transport home, forcing them to sleep at work.

Airport Handling Services chairman Lionel Jacobs announced that the company would provide transport for the staff before 6 a.m. and after 6 p.m. Union negotiator Mario Jacobs has said it is likely that the strikers will agree to this, but added that the strike will continue if wage demands and other issues were not resolved.

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