

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

24 October 2003

## Postal workers in London hold unofficial strike

On October 22, thousands of postal workers in London walked off the job in an unofficial strike. The action involved more than 4,000 workers at points during the day who were protesting a number of issues including the suspension of union officials. The Royal Mail reported that 2,000 employees struck and that 1,000 of these were based at Greenford in west London.

In a separate dispute, hundreds of postal workers in north London are to vote on industrial action in support of a colleague who claimed he was being denied a transfer to the Midlands.

## Irish bus workers strike in the North

On October 17, bus drivers in Northern Ireland held the first in a series of one-day strikes in a pay dispute. The action involved 1,700 drivers employed by Citybus and Ulsterbus. The strike affected 300 Translink routes, disrupting the journeys of about 180,000 passengers including 65,000 schoolchildren.

The drivers earn a basic salary of around £13,500 and had rejected a 3.5 percent pay rise. Following this, the companies offered a deal that included a 5.7 percent pay increase with an extra day off and "minor restructuring." This was also rejected. The unions are calling for an increase of 4 percent above inflation for the next five years. Translink rejected this demand.

The Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) representative John Coffey stated that drivers' wages were 17 percent behind the average manual workers' earnings.

The GMB and TGWU announced that future strikes are being considered on subsequent Fridays pending the resolution of the dispute.

## Greek municipal workers continue industrial action

Greek municipal workers continued their strike this week in a dispute over pay and to protest over plans to allow private companies to collect garbage. By October 21 the strike entered its sixth day, with garbage piling up in the capital city of Athens. Trade union representatives of the employees are to meet employees this week before deciding whether to continue the industrial action.

## Irish cabin crew staff set to strike

Cabin crew employed by the Irish airline Aer Lingus are to hold two 24-hour stoppages on October 23 and October 27. The action is the latest stage in an ongoing pay dispute.

The 1,000 workers, represented by the IMPACT trade union, are demanding a 4 percent pay rise due under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness that was ratified more than a year ago. To this end, they have held a work-to-rule for the past several weeks. In response, the company is seeking to implement more productivity increases as part of any pay increase.

The company has announced the cancellation of 26 flights from Dublin and Shannon airports on October 23. In another attempt to break the strike, Aer Lingus has planned for charter aircraft manned by non-Aer Lingus crew to be kept on standby.

## Ford workers at Genk, Belgium, march

On October 18, 15,000 Ford workers and their supporters marched through the streets of Genk, in northern Belgium. Delegations were present from all over the country and all sectors to take part in a march for

employment. Three thousand Ford jobs out of 9,000 are immediately threatened at the plant, but all of them could go.

Solidarity messages were sent to the workers from France, Brazil, Italy, Germany, Britain, Sweden, the US, Mexico and the Philippines.

## Temporary art workers and technicians demonstrate in France

For several months, French temporary art workers and technicians have protested against cuts in their unemployment assurance scheme.

On October 18, at 9 p.m., the broadcasting of "Star Academy" on the TF1 TV station, with an audience of 6 million, was disrupted by a group of demonstrators occupying the stage and showing a banner with "Turn off your TV sets!"

The moderator of the show, Nikos Aliagas, gave them the microphone to express their demands. While this was occurring, some demonstrators attempted to occupy the studio at Plaine Saint-Denis. As a result, six people were hurt and hospitalised at the end of a clash with security staff. The police arrested another four demonstrators.

On October 20, 200 temporary workers demonstrated at the headquarters of TF1 at Boulogne-Bilancourt to demand that the management withdraw charges against the four arrested. Following this action, the four were released.

## French iron manganese workers protest against threat to jobs

On October 20, some 300 of the 351 workers of Comilog, an iron manganese factory of the Eramet group, protested at the port of Boulogne-sur-Mer (Pas-de-Calais), the most important French fishing port. The workers oppose plans to close the factory with the loss of up to 700 jobs. The closure of the factory at the end of this year and the dismissal of the 351 workers were announced at the beginning of the year.

During the protest, the workers arrested the director of the factory. The blockades they constructed hindered the daily deliveries of 150 to 200 trucks that bring fish into the northern French region and to Paris. At the end of the morning, when a large number of police were in place around the town, the workers tipped six tons of iron manganese into a basin and then threatened to tip acids or iron chlorine into the channel.

The factory is one of the most important economic institutions in the town. It contributes to 57 percent of the commercial activities of the port of Boulogne-sur-Mer. The French government indirectly holds, via the Avera group and BRGM, 27 percent of the value of the enterprise.

## Strike of Ugandan "Agoa girls"

Six hundred female workers at the Tri-Star Apparel factory in Bugolobi (Uganda) downed tools on October 21 and barricaded themselves in their dormitories. The strike is in protest against low salaries, mistreatment and poor working conditions.

The workers are locally known as the "Agoa girls" because their factory, which is Sri Lankan-owned, was established as part of the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA). It produces for well-known firms like Marks & Spencer and The Gap, and exports high-quality goods to the United States. The firm's web site boasts of using the most modern equipment and offering its workers "an attractive package...with canteen facilities, health care and other state of the art facilities."

According to a January 16 BBC report, the workers receive free board and lodging, and 20 US cents an hour in addition. Many of them have travelled long distances to live and work at the Tri-Star factory, and their

meagre wages help to maintain their families back home.

The strikers described their living conditions to the *Monitor* (Kampala). They said they were overworked and paid too little, and some of them had been subject to beatings. They were forced to share dormitories and sanitary facilities with men who are being brought in among the new recruits. They added that other workers were being brought in from Ntyil in Jinja to be employed at an even lower rate than theirs.

The strike was sparked off when Molly Nantisa, an accounts assistant, was dismissed after she had alerted the workers that 50 of them were to be sacked. Nantisa told the *Monitor* that the company tried to justify her dismissal by falsely accusing her of misappropriating Shs46,100.

The workers decided to take immediate action and barricaded themselves in their dormitories. A team of officials, including Susan Muhwezi, the president's secretary on AGOA, Teddy Ssezi Cheeye, the director of economic monitoring unit at the Internal Security organisation, and Labour Commissioner Dr. David Ogaram rushed to the factory to try to resolve the situation. They were initially denied access, but eventually held a meeting with the managing director. In an attempt to pacify the strikers, the police arrested one of the supervisors for allegedly beating an employee.

The strikers are demanding the intervention of President Yoweri Museveni.

#### **Kenyan council workers strike for back pay**

Local government workers in the Nakuru district of Kenya have rejected a "back to work" offer by the municipal council.

The 1,600 workers, who began their strike on October 13, are demanding the payment of outstanding wages for July, August and September. Council leader Mayor Wachira Ngoru promised that 80 percent of revenue collected would be used to pay them, adding that the council had Sh1.8 million to pay the employees if they resumed duties.

James Kuria, branch chairman of the Local Government Workers Union (LGWU), told the *East African Standard* (Nairobi) that the workers were "tired of empty promises." He said the workers have been patient with the council, but added that they could not continue working without pay. He insisted that the strike would continue until all the back wages, amounting to Sh51 million, were paid.

#### **Arrested Nigerian trade unionists are bailed**

Six Nigerian trade union officials arrested on October 13, as they were picketing filling stations that were selling petrol above an agreed price of N34 per litre, have been released on bail for the sum of N500,000 each. They have been accused of criminal conspiracy, criminal trespass, obstruction and inciting of the public against government of the day contrary to sections 97, 145, 348 and 114 of the penal code (See the WSWS for October 18).

Mr. Joseph Gadzama, president of the Abuja branch of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), represented the accused in court. The NBA fully endorsed the actions of labour leaders, and Gadzama told the *Daily Trust* that the Abuja NBA would defend the NLC officials at no charge until the end of the case and "until they are discharged and acquitted." He said the accused NLC officials have not done anything wrong, "in fact, they need to be praised rather than condemned as the case may be now."

Many filling stations that are selling petrol at between N39.90 and N45 a litre are employing policemen to guard their premises. The *Daily Trust* claimed that huge amounts of money are being paid to the police authorities to secure police services. The paper reported seeing mobile policemen armed to the teeth.

The situation is causing concern amongst the Nigerian authorities. The chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Petroleum, Dr. Cairo Ojuigbo, said that the House had vowed to secure the release of labour leaders, claiming that the "House is warming up to arrest and prosecute any marketer that sells petroleum above N34."

However, the government remains committed to a policy of deregulation

of the market in fuel. Special Adviser to the President on Political Affairs Dr. Gbolade Oshinowo insists that a peaceful deregulated environment facilitates refining within Nigeria and lessens the country's reliance on imported petroleum products.

The increased fuel price has already severely affected the cost of living in Nigeria. The *Daily Champion* reports that transport fares have jumped by 100 percent. The price of food and other items has also increased.

On October 20, the NLC and its allies declared their intention to resume the suspended nationwide strike over higher fuel prices. Mr. Bright Anokwuru, a National Executive Council member of NLC, and Mr. Segun Sango, a representative of the National Conscience Party (NCP), told reporters, "We can no longer continue to fold our arms and lament our situation.

"We have decided to resurrect our suspended action. Right now, we are resuming mobilisation because it is now clear that the marketers are not ready to listen to us and are not bothered by the agreement.

"This is unfortunate and we are disappointed; even if the agreement was a temporary one, the marketers ought to have complied. The governors also have the constitutional role of enforcing the agreement, but here we are. We have been made to look foolish by entering into that agreement and suspending the strike."

Regarding the date for the resumption of the strike, the spokesmen said that as soon as the mobilisation is completed, "we will announce it to the whole world."

President Olusegun Obasanjo has held meetings with the major marketers, the leadership of the Petroleum Products Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA), the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), the umbrella body for senior workers.

New prices may be fixed at the stakeholders' meeting on October 30.

#### **South African retail staff strike**

Six thousand employees of a major shopping giant in the Western Cape joined about 24,000 colleagues countrywide on a strike this week after a breakdown in talks.

Shoprite Checkers employees organised by the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) are striking over wages and working hours alongside workers employed by Hyperamas, OK Furniture, U-Save and Sentra stores.

The dispute centres on the implementation of the Wholesale and Retail Sectoral Determination Act, which came into effect this year. The legislation guarantees certain gains for employees, and particularly casual workers. SACCAWU has accused the retailer of not complying with it.

Union deputy secretary Mduduzi Mbongwe said the dispute centres on conditions of employment for casual and flexi-workers, minimum wages for hourly work, the right to choose retirement funds, and HIV testing. He said, "SACCAWU has been engaging with Shoprite Checkers for seven months around compliance with the Wholesale and Retail Sectoral Determination Act of 2002, without any meaningful co-operation from Shoprite Checkers who have been undermining gains for workers by drastically reducing the hours of work and therefore the income of non-full-time workers. The priority is to engage the company around casual workers."

SACCAWU alleges that Shoprite has reduced the hourly pay rate to as low as R7 and cut down weekly hours for temporary workers to an average of about eight hours so that some earn as little as R56 a week.



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