Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

3 October 2003

Over half a million workers strike in Slovakia

On September 29, more than 500,000 Slovakian workers participated in a one-hour general strike in a bid to force the government to negotiate over its demands on pay and conditions.

Called by the Slovak Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ), the industrial action affected the Bratislava Volkswagen plant, up to 70 percent of elementary and secondary schools and civilian employees of the military. It also involved railway workers, energy and heating plant workers, workers at the largest hospitals in Kosice and Banska Bystrica, food-processing plant staff, mineworkers and Vahostav construction company staff.

European dockworkers demonstrate against restructuring

On September 29, dockworkers from throughout northeast Europe demonstrated in Rotterdam, Holland as part of a 24-hour strike to protest the European Commission's plan to "liberalise" European ports.

Under new EU proposals employers would be permitted to contract out work to cheaper and untrained workers. The legislation is also designed to promote and stimulate competition between the region's harbours. In a further assault on conditions and working practises it would also allow untrained ship personnel to carry out harbour work. Dockworkers fear that many jobs will be lost throughout Europe as a result.

In total some 8,000 strikers from Antwerp and Rotterdam were joined by German and Romanian dockworkers. The demonstration began in the morning and proceeded via the Maastunnel and Erasmusbrug to the Wilhelminakade in the Rotterdam port area. A rally was then held that was addressed by several European union leaders.

During the course of the protest, riot police arrested 23 strikers and mounted attacks on the picket lines.

Miners in Poland protest to save jobs

Coal miners in southern Poland held a day of protest action on September 26 in an ongoing campaign to oppose the governments plans to restructure the industry and close a number of mines. The miners and their supporters held a number of protests in the industrial area of Silesia, including the blocking of railway lines and roads.

Around the city of Katowice the miners blocked some 16 roads and railway lines. The previous day a group of miners began an underground sit-in at a local pit.

The government is planning to shut four mines with the loss of at least 8,500 jobs in southern Poland.

French workers protest at factory closures

Factory workers from STMicroelectronics, Thompson and Philips in the town of Rennes held a series of protest of three factories in September. The General Confederation of Labour, Force Ouvrière, and other local unions organised the demonstrations.

STMircoelectronics management announced in August that they would shut the Rennes branch with 600 job losses and transfer production in the US and Europe to countries with cheaper manufacturing costs. In addition, Thompson management said they intend to dismiss some 60 of the 800 workers at the Rennes factory, while Philips plans to close its research centre with 70 employees.

More than 1,500 people participated in a demonstration on September 18. Many information scientists working in sub-enterprises in the Rennes industrial zone joined the movement because they also feel threatened by dismissals.

French Rhodia Organique Saint-Fons workers continue strike

Nineteen workers at the heating system firm Rhodia-Organique in France are continuing indefinite strike action which began on September 10 over management plans to transfer jobs to another enterprise.

The strike is also in protest against job cuts that have occurred at other branches of the factory in recent years. The action caused the temporary closure of parts of the factory.

GIAT Industries workers continue protests amid job losses

Workers at GIAT, which produces military equipment for France's armed ground forces, including Leclerc tanks, artillery systems and ammunition, continued protest action last week against government plans to shed thousands of jobs.

In the next weeks details on 3,750 of the 6,250 job losses will be finalised. On September 29, trade unions walkout out of the fourth meeting of the central committee of the enterprise (CCE) after management refused to give a greater concession to the unions than the 250 jobs proposed on September 25.

On September 29, union members demonstrated at the sites of Saint-Etienne, where 400 workers attended, and at Roanne, where 300 to 400 are employed. At the Toulouse factory, as well as the Bourges and Saint-Chamond branches, some 200 workers blocked the entrance. At the Tulle plant, where 200 of 389 employees are threatened with dismissal, 150 workers went out on strike.

London postal workers strike

Postal workers in London held a 24-hour strike on Wednesday October 2 and have threatened further walkouts to coincide with stoppages by tens of thousands of council workers in the capital.

The postal workers, members of the Communications Workers Union (CWU), took strike action over the allocation of London weighting allowance—a salary top-up paid to offset the high cost of living in the capital. Property prices are at least double, if not triple, elsewhere in the country and the cost of basic necessities—including food, drink and travel—can be just as high. Royal Mail has said they will only pay £3,784 to those working in the city, and £2,667 for those

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in the suburbs.

Some 20,000 workers participated in the strike that cost Royal Mail £10 million and caused a backlog of post. Some 4,000 managers were drafted in to get out special deliveries and to collect mail in the main commercial areas. Most of London's 1,500 post offices remained open, however, because they are run by independent businesses.

The UCW has said it intends to coordinate further protests with the public service union Unison, which is campaigning for a £4,000 London weighting allowance and plans a 24-hour strike on October 16.

Glass workers in Turkey dismissed for joining union

Leading Turkish glassware company Pasabahce, which belongs to Sisecam Group, dismissed some 300 workers because they joined the trade union Kristal-Is on September 27.

Seven hundred glass workers from Pasabahce in Eskisehir city joined the union during September 8/9. This included subcontracting workers who were employed illegally. Pasabahce responded by trying to force them to resign from the union. When workers rejected this pressure they were sacked. According to Turkish labour code, a trade union requires 51 percent membership in any company for collective bargaining purposes.

Immediately after this unjustified dismissal, the fired workers began a sit-down action outside the plant. Some 300 employees and their families have been involved in the protest since September 27. Another 400 workers inside the plant also began a sit-down strike. Glass workers around Turkey have supported the protest with a series of demonstrations.

Zimbabwe workers strike over wage dispute

A nationwide strike of Edgar's Stores employees began on September 25. The workers are demanding a 200 percent salary increase, which they say is necessary to protect living standards from rocketing inflation. They have rejected as totally inadequate a 50 percent increase offer from the company. Feelings are running very high and at two branches in Bulawayo workers held a sit-down strike on the premises.

One employee described their wages as "nothing". "Deductions have to be effected after which one has to pay rent, buy food and pay for transport to work. The [monthly salary] which the majority of us are getting here can only last for five days. In fact, this company is paying me from just selling a pair of trousers or a dress as the prices of clothes now range at around $Z50,000 [$US60]. So these people are being insensitive to our plight."

An Edgar's works council member told the *Zimbabwe Standard* (Harare) that the company made more than $Z4.5 billion profit in the first six months of this year. Strikers accuse the company of serious mismanagement of funds and allege that corruption and nepotism are rife among top managers.

In a memorandum to the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, Managing Director Ray Mlotshwa described the strike action as "illegal" and claimed it was in defiance of the specific advice from the NEC of the Commercial Sectors of Zimbabwe.

An arbitration process was scheduled for September 30.

Strike at South Africa's Delta Motor Corporation

Three thousand workers at the Delta Motor Corporation in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, downed tools on September 22 in protest against the company's sick leave policy and other work-related issues. All production ceased at the company's Kempston Road and Struandale production facilities

Delta claims it wants to implement measures "aimed at curbing sick leave abuse." A spokesman for the National Union of Metalworkers of SA (NUMSA) insists that Delta's sick leave policy flouts the Basic Conditions of Employment Act**.** The union claims the company is not paying workers for sick leave when they provided a doctor's certificate and before they had exceeded the 30-day sick leave in a three-year cycle available to them in terms of the act.

On September 27, a spokesman for Delta claimed that NUMSA had agreed to suspend the strike and to meet with Delta over the "sick absence policy". However, mass meetings held on September 29 rejected any such proposal and the strike continues.

According to the South African Broadcasting Corporation,NUMSA has made proposals to the company to "deal with the issue of absenteeism, and to provide counselling for members who have problems with the system". The union and management met on September 30 under the guidance of the Council for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration.

Supreme Furniture workers protest in Lusaka

Employees at Supreme Furnishers blocked roads in Lusaka on September 25, in a campaign to secure the K3 billion ($US622,420) terminal benefits due to them. Using four vehicles they formed a barricade across the Katunjila Road, in the Zambian capital, blocking passage of Works and Supply Minister Ludwig Sondashi. Protesting workers shouted at Sondashi to address them until he was forced to retreat. Armed police officers and others with tear gas canisters ordered the workers to remove the vehicles from the road.

The workers had been previously addressed by Labour Minister Chile Ng'uni, who claimed that the terminal benefits had been released by Supreme Furnishers and would soon be paid to employees. "My appeal is that I want to kneel down for your confidence you have shown in me," he said and asked employees to resume work and let the Ministry of Labour handle the matter.

Demonstrating workers held placards denouncing their regional manager Johnson Mapeni. Some of the placards read: "Mapeni is trying to kill children" and "Corrupt black Boer on the run." Some of them converged on Supreme Furnishers outlets in the city centre in an attempt to confront Mapeni.

Charles Nshamba, a spokesman for the protesting workers told the *Post* (Lusaka) that management was supposed to pay K3 billion by Monday but the company filed an affidavit against payment of the money. "We invited Nguni (Labour Deputy Minister) to intervene in this matter," he said. "The Boers are closing down the shop and they are leaving".

Mapeni has told workers not to panic, insisting that the company was not closing.

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