

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

9 January 2004

Air traffic controllers in northern Spain strike

On January 4 air traffic controllers from the Torrejon control centre in northern Spain took strike action in an overtime dispute. The centre controls air traffic in the northern and central region of Spain. The stoppage resulted in the cancellation of 49 flights and the delay of many more national and international flights. Airports affected included Madrid's Barajas where the average delay was 55 minutes, and Barcelona's El Prat airport where sixteen flights were cancelled

Depot workers in Merseyside, England strike in pay dispute

Depot workers employed by supermarket Sainsbury's in Merseyside began a 24-hour strike on January 7 in a strike over pay. The stoppage was the second such action by the 750 employees, members of the USDAW shopworkers trade union. The staff began the latest strike by walking off the job at the Haydock distribution depot at 10.00 p.m.

The workers' average pay is lower than those employed at similar firms in the region. They are currently paid £5.75 an hour and Sainsbury's proposes to increase this to £7.55, but not to the regional average of £8 an hour.

Manchester tram drivers strike

Tram drivers in Greater Manchester held a 24-hour strike on New Year's Day in a dispute over trade union recognition. The workers are members of the ASLEF trade union and are protesting that the Transport and General Workers Union has sole negotiation rights for pay and conditions with the employers, Metrolink. ASLEF represents a quarter of Metrolink's 340 staff. The union plans to sanction further strike action over the next two months.

Nurses at psychiatric ward in Cumbria, England vote to strike

On January 5, almost 150 nurses at the Carleton psychiatric clinic in Cumbria, England, voted to take strike action in protest at standards of care and the

safety of staff at the centre. The employees are members of the public sector workers union UNISON and voted by a margin of 3 to 1 in favour of a one-day stoppage.

The North Cumbria Mental Health NHS Trust acknowledged that problems existed within the service and that it intended to resolve the dispute before the advent of industrial action. A UNISON spokesman said, "We do not want to disrupt life for patients, but so far, talks with management have been unsuccessful."

Striking Zimbabwean hospital staff return to work

Striking Zimbabwean doctors and nurses were expected to return to work by January 8, according to *IRIN*. The agency reported a statement by a Ministry of Health public relations officer that 75 percent of nurses were back at work and that doctors were starting to return to their posts.

The hospital doctors have been on strike since October 23 in support of a demand for an 8,000 percent pay increase needed to keep pace with runaway inflation. They are also protesting against the deteriorating conditions within Zimbabwe's hospitals, which are dangerous for patients and medical staff.

On *Radio Zimbabwe*, Hospital Doctors' Association (HDA) President Phibion Manyanga said that his members were returning to work ... "to help our patients, not because of the offer that the government has put in front of us." He did not reveal details of the proposed new salary scales, but described them as "far below expectations." It is believed that doctors have been offered a 250 percent increase, which in no way compensates for the huge escalation in the cost of living.

Manyanga told Agence France-Presse (AFP) that doctors were giving the government two months breathing space "to increase the salaries to doctors' expectations and address outstanding grievances such as car allowances and providing hospitals with

equipment and drugs.” He warned that if the issues were not addressed to the doctors’ satisfaction, they would strike again.

The decision to call off the strike came only a few days after an ultimatum was issued to the strikers by General Constantine Chiwenga, who on New Year’s Day was appointed as commander of Zimbabwe’s defence forces.

The Star reported that Chiwenga ordered the return to work when he chaired a meeting between Health Minister David Parirenyatwa and three HDA representatives. He threatened the HDA officials, telling them, “If you refuse to cooperate, we can take you to the army barracks and detain you and you will see what will happen ... I have fought 45 battles since I was 17 years old and I have never lost. This one is just a cup of tea and we can solve it within a matter of minutes.”

Health Minister Parirenyatwa denied the doctors were intimidated. He told the *Star* that Chiwenga merely appealed for a return to work because he was concerned about the fact that army doctors had been sent into the hospitals.

An earlier attempt to force a return was made just over a month ago when the doctors’ employer, the Public Service Commission, declared the strike illegal. Seven HDA members were arraigned in court charged with neglecting their duties, but were later acquitted.

According to the *Star*, Chiwenga told the strikers that the acquittal was academic. He said, “I am sorry to inform you that we do not accept that ruling. We are the ones who are in power and we can choose to ignore that ruling. Court order or not, we rule this country.”

With inflation raging at over 620 percent health services in Zimbabwe are in crisis. Fees for private consultations have recently more than doubled and now private doctors are demanding to be paid in advance. They claim that health insurance firms have taken more than two months to settle their bills and in the meantime money has lost value due to hyperinflation.

Nigerian workers teargassed

A contingent of approximately 200 Nigerian state forces tear-gassed workers who were picketing outside the premises of the Syrian company, Mikano International Limited, Lagos on the weekend of December 28/29. Two hundred workers were arrested, including President of the National Union of Shop and

Distributive Employees (NUSDE) Bright Anokwuru and General Secretary Comrade Babatunde Sule.

According to the *Daily Trust* (Abuja) the police and soldiers “stormed the venue of the picketing in a military commando manner in a convey of vehicles piloted by a pick-up van ... and started shooting indiscriminately.”

Bright Anokwuru was addressing the company employees when the police “started beating him with gun-butt, truncheons and horsewhips, as well as dragging him on the ground across several metres of rough terrain.”

P.M. News reported that two members of staff of the Independent Communications Network Limited (ICNL), publishers of the *NEWS* magazine and *P.M. News*, were attacked by the police, who also damaged the windscreen of a car belonging to Olumide Ayeni. Femi Anjorin, a librarian with the publishing house, was also seriously beaten.

The picketing workers had gone on strike against bad wages, non-payment of end-of-the-year bonus, harassment of female workers, non-remittance of tax deductions to the Board of Inland Revenue and intimidation of workers by the Syrian officials. *P.M. News* reported that 94 workers were sacked after management refused to meet the strikers’ demands. A list of the names of sacked workers was displayed outside the company premises.



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