Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

23 April 2004

UK: Birmingham postal workers to continue strike

Postal workers are set to strike later this week at the St. Stephen's Street sorting office in Aston, Birmingham, in a dispute over the dismissal of a colleague. It is expected that more than 1,000 are to participate in the 24-hour strike on April 22. Workers at the depot held unofficial last month in protest at the dismissal. This followed unofficial action at the St Stephen's Street centre last month, after a postman was dismissed.

The Communication Workers' Union plans to hold talks regarding the dispute with Royal Mail, which has announced its intention to draft in managers from Birmingham and other parts of the local region in order to minimise the impact of the stoppage.

Strike set to impact Cannes film festival

Artists and technicians employed on a temporary basis in France are continuing their ongoing protest against government reforms and have announced this week that their future industrial action may disrupt the Cannes film festival May 12-23. One report said that a group representing the workers had planned an "occupation committee."

The employees have been on strike for nearly 12 months and are in dispute with government proposals to change their benefits. The reform of the unemployment assurance scheme was supported in June 2003 by three trade unions. Under the law workers must now work a minimum of 507 hours during a six-month period in order to qualify for benefits. Under the previous legislation the period was 12 months.

This week representatives of the workers held talks with French culture minister Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres on April 19. The same day an event at the Theatre Molières at the Champs-Elysées had to be cancelled as theatre staff began a strike to support the temporary workers.

Some 50 activists of the "Coordination des inermittents de spectacle" (Coordination of temporary art workers) sang the "Internationale" on the stage and showed banners displaying the slogan, "Abolition of the protocol." (The "protocol" refers to new regulations regarding cuts in the unemployment assurance scheme implemented by the government last year.) Also on April 19, 4,500 temporary workers demonstrated in Paris against the assurance scheme regulations.

During the course of the dispute those involved have held many demonstrations and protests through the country, including the disruption of several festivals and industry and events such as the French premiere of the third *Lord of the Rings* film last December.

Public transport workers strike in Toulon, France

Public transport workers ended their strike over pay this week in the French town of Toulon. The action began on April 5 following workers' demands for an increase in wages and new regulations at the personal administration. During the stoppage just 20 of a total of 200 buses were running, with 80 percent of the 600 strong staff participating. After two weeks of action, the workers voted to end the strike after a rise of 48 euros a month had been granted.

Workers at Alstom, Paris, continue strike

Workers at the Alstom engineering plant at La Corneuve in Paris continued their strike this week in protest at planned job losses. Management at the plant propose to shed 341 of 710 jobs under a new "social plan." The management of Alstom had last year announced some 8,000 job cuts worldwide, 1,862 of them in France.

The action began on March 8 and 150 workers are involved in blockading the factory that produces turbines. The unions involved have demanded new negotiations with management regarding the job losses and restructuring. An "assembly of solidarity" was attended by 250 workers on April 14. Management has initiated legal proceedings against 85 striking workers and the CGT trade union for "attacks on the liberty of work" at the court of Bobigny.

Hoover workers in South Wales strike

On April 21, workers at the Hoover electrical goods factory in Merthyr Tydfil, south Wales, held a 24-hour strike over pay. The staff are members of the Amicus trade union. Some 60 workers set up picket lines, hitting production of washing machines and tumble driers among other items.

The trade union called the strike in protest at plans by the company to impose a pay freeze. An Amicus representative said, "This year, there's no increase on basic rates, although there's a discussion about a bonus payment, but that's unreliable when you look at the last three-year period. Our members need a real increase." A further strike is planned next month pending the resolution of the dispute. Hoover is owned by the Italian electronics firm Candy and said that it had been hit by heavy trade losses in recent years due to increased international competition.

Israeli bank workers begin strike

United Mizrahi Bank workers began industrial action on April 19, including holding meetings during the working day and refusing to conduct marketing activities at the bank's branches.

The workforce are opposed to structural changes planned by Mizrahi among its marketing units, including the employment of external senior employees. Sara Lazarovich, chair of the workers' committee, said, "We will make every effort not to harm the bank

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customers at this stage."

First International Bank of Israel workers have also begun industrial action and are refusing to conduct marketing activities as well as professional training sessions for in-house staff.

Tel Aviv lifeguards threaten strike action

The lifeguards on Tel Aviv's beaches are threatening to strike in order to save their jobs. The strike call was made just days before the start of the official bathing season.

The ministry of Interior and Tel Aviv Municipality has announced its intentions to cut the number of lifeguards from three to two at every station. The beach managers contend that this will endanger bathers' lives, and are considering a petition to the High Court of Justice. They accuse Mayor Ron Huldai of preferring budget cuts over safety, and Minister Avraham Poraz of agreeing to the mayor's wishes without hearing the opinion of the lifeguards.

Zimbabwean tobacco workers strike

On April 16 workers halted trading on the Zimbabwean Tobacco Sales Floors (TSF) when they downed tools in protest against the delay in settling their wage demands. Trading was also disrupted on the auction floors at nearby Burley Marketing Zimbabwe (BMZ). The striking workers gathered inside the TSF Limited floors, holding up placards and shouting slogans.

Estevao Cumbulane, the secretary general of the Zimbabwe Tobacco Industry Workers Union (ZTIWU), told the *Herald* (Harare) that the workers were unhappy with their employers' current offer of 63 percent. With hyperinflation in Zimbabwe causing rapid devaluation of their wages, the strikers are demanding that their salary increment is linked to the Poverty Datum Line.

Cumbulane said, "A 63 percent salary increment will see the least paid worker earning $400,000 (US$92). But what we are saying is that we want the salaries for those workers to be adjusted according to the Consumer Council's bread basket, which was pegged at $907,000 (US$208) as of February, or the Central Statistical Offices bread basket, which is pegged at $700,000 (US$161)."

During the strike meeting on the trading floors, police burst in and arrested eight of the union leaders who had been addressing the strikers. They were released only after they paid $200,000 (US$46) "admission of guilt" fines for "engaging in conduct likely to provoke a breech of the peace" under the Public Order and Security Act.

Hundreds of small farmers who had brought their tobacco for auction that day were stranded with nowhere to stay. TSF had to advance loans to enable them to pay their bus fares home.

Sierra Leonean lecturers strike over bad conditions

Lecturers at the constituent colleges of the University of Sierra Leone struck on April 16 to oppose their poor conditions of service. Even before the wider strike had begun, there had been no lectures at the Njala University College campus, New England Ville, for the previous three weeks.

One of the striking junior lecturers told *Concord Times* (Freetown) that they would not resume classes until the authorities had addressed their conditions. On April 19, students held campus meetings to discuss the lecturers' industrial action.

Nigerian census staff threatens strike over salaries

The 2005 Nigerian national population and housing census is likely to be postponed because of the threat of industrial action by workers employed by the National Population Commission (NPC).

According to the *News Agency of Nigeria* (NAN) the workers are demanding payment of eight months housing allowance and salary arrears ranging from two to three months owed since 2001.

NPC workers told NAN that the upcoming census was their only chance to demand the arrears. "This is our opportunity to get the money. If we allow the census to be held without getting the arrears, nobody will listen to us any more."

The census has already been postponed twice because of non-release of funds by the federal government.

Makerere University resumes lectures

The strike of 800 lecturers at Makerere University, Uganda, which began on April 6, ended April 15. The action was suspended after members of the Makerere University Academic Staff Association (MUASA) received letters from the Chancellor and Prime Minister Apollo Nsibambi containing assurances their salaries would be increased in the next financial year as promised by President Museveni.

The strike chairman, Dr. Ezra Twesigomwe, told *New Vision* (Kampala), "I have communicated to all the lecturers to resume their duties. It is now okay, but we are waiting."

The offer of a 30 percent increment proposed by the University Council has been accepted as an interim measure. According to *New Vision*, President Museveni is advocating an overhaul of the public wage policy that would replace the present system of awards according to seniority with one, which "awards people according to their contribution towards the vision of the country."

"Go-slow" by Kenyan power workers

Kenya Electrical Trades and Allied Workers Union (KETAWU) Secretary General Ernest Nadome announced April 16 that unionised workers at the Kenya Power and Lighting Company (KPLC) were operating a "go-slow." He told the *East African Standard* (Nairobi) that the union was preparing to issue a strike notice if its grievances are not addressed.

Jasper Oduor, KPLC managing director, has insisted that the company is unaware of any "go-slow" or any dispute with the union that would warrant industrial action by the workers.

He said: "Ketawu has not registered any complaints with the company, nor has the union indicated to the company that it is aggrieved." He urged the union to comply with the "laid-down procedure" on dispute resolution under Kenya's labour laws.

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