Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

30 April 2004

Industrial action at Fiat in Italy halts all production

Workers employed by Fiat at a car parts plant in southern Italy continued their strike this week. The strike organised by the FIOM-CGIL metalworkers union has resulted in the halting of all Fiat motor vehicle production.

The two-week action by employees at the Melfi plant in the Basilicata region is to demand better pay and shift patterns. During the course of the strike, workers have blockaded roads around the factory preventing parts from reaching other auto plants in Italy where most of Fiat's cars are manufactured.

Fiat have condemned the strike and supported a court judgement declaring the blockade illegal.

On April 23, the company announced that it had lost production of 12,000 vehicles during the course of the strike and that shares had fallen by 1.3 percent to 6.08 euros. Latest figures indicate that 16,300 vehicles from planned production have been lost, with an ongoing loss rate of 4,000 vehicles a day.

Fiat said that the strike was extremely damaging to its business as it had cut down on stocks of components and completed vehicles as part of its recent restructuring. On April 26, the impact of the stoppage resulted in an Alfa Romeo car factory Pomigliano, near Naples suspending production. This follows a suspension in production of vehicles at Fiat plants in Turin and Termine Imerese. Another smaller vehicles plant at Val di Sangro has also suspended production.

On the same day riot police attacked striking pickets and their supporters at the Melfi plant, injuring nine people including seven of the protesters. One of those attacked by the police is reported to be in a serious condition and was among those injured taken to hospital. More than 1,000 workers and their supporters participated in the picket line attacked by the police. One worker involved in the protest said, "We're not rioters. We're asking the company to sign an agreement with workers from Melfi, but so far we've just met with a brick wall."

The FIOM-CGIL called for a four-hour nationwide strike to be held this week. Three other trade unions involved in the strike announced they had signed a preliminary agreement with Fiat on April 23 regarding shifts patterns at the plant. Further talks are scheduled for May.

Workers at the Termini Imerese factory had sent a contribution of 25,000 euros to support the struggle of the workers at Melfi. Further donations have arrived to support the Fiat workers from other engineering plants. Fiat announced at the beginning of this week that it would be holding talks led by chief executive officer Giuseppe Morchio, with all unions involved in the strike.

Hungarian airline workers hold 24-hour strike

Ground staff and cleaners employed by Hungarian national airline Malev held a 24-hour strike on April 27, leading to the cancellation of 20 out of its scheduled 67 flights. The strike follows a breakdown in negations between management and one of the six trade unions with members at Malev regarding a pay increase for the year 2004/2005. Workers are calling for a pay increase of 30 percent.

London firefighters set to protest at proposed changes to job role

The Fire Brigades Union in the UK announced this week that its members in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets had voted by 122 to 21 to take industrial action short of a strike in a dispute over job descriptions.

The London Fire Brigade (LFB) is attempting to force firefighters to attend ambulance calls. The strike ballot was called after the LFB refused to enter negotiations with the union over the issue. One of the major concerns of the union is that "firefighters, unlike paramedics, were not trained to make medical diagnoses, nor could they administer drugs."

Further urgent concerns that the union said were not acceptable included management's proposal of a two-day training course that could not equip firefighters to deal with the range of medical conditions they would face on ambulance calls. In addition, firefighters attending an ambulance call would be unable to attend subsequent fire calls that might be received.

The union added that "attending such calls is outside of the national agreement reached after the fire service pay dispute in 2002/2003."

Announcing the ballot result a union spokesman said, "We do not want industrial action. London Fire Brigade must stop their confrontational approach, negotiate and discuss with the FBU what role firefighters may have in helping to reduce the unacceptably high level of deaths from heart attacks. The Ambulance Service also needs to explain why it cannot deliver a speedy response to the most urgent medical emergencies. If it cannot perform the basics of what it is set up to do then that needs to be addressed by the health service."

The FBU is considering instructing its members to "refuse to attend training for 'co-responder' duties, refusing to handle equipment provided for that purpose, and refusing to attend 'co-responder' calls."

Norwegian transport strike leads to lock out

On April 26, several hundred striking transport workers demonstrated outside the main grocery store distributor, ICA Distribution in the town of Skårer. Workers are demanding better pay and terms of employment and have been locked out by their employers.

At least 400 striking workers demonstrated and a total of 450 workers have been locked out. As a result of the strike 1,300 workers are currently not working. The union said that nonunion workers now had the same benefits and pay as unionised workers.

French power workers continue strikes and protests

On April 22, gas and electricity power workers employed by the EDF and GDF organisations held a protest day against government privatisation measures. Demonstrations were held in Toulouse, Nantes, Montbéliard, Tarbes, Rouen Le Havre, Rennes, Gravelines, Roubaix, Tourcoing and Villeneuve d'Ascq and Paris. Trade unions reported that 50 to 75 percent of the workers participated in the action.

Trade unions involved had various plans regarding the protests, with the Confederation General du Travail calling for a 24-hour strike while the social democratic Confederation Francaise Démocratique du Travail (CFDT) called for a "mobilisation." The Confederation Francaise des Travailleurs Chrétiens (CFTC) called for a limited four-hour strike and the

© World Socialist Web Site

Force Ouvrière trade union called to voluntary local actions, but not national participation.

Actions have included interrupting public lighting equipment, as well as demonstrations in front of the "préfectures" (regional administration) and organised appeals to their political representatives. At Nantes and Tarbes the electricity current of poorer people, that had been cut as they were unable to pay, was reinstated.

The government had planned to discuss the project on April 22 at the Conseil d'Etat (state council), but this has now been postponed until the end of May.

Since the evening of April 21 public lightening has been cut at the towns of Rodez, Cahors, Millau, Figeac, Nantes, Moulins, Monlucon, Le Puy, Limonges, Lourdes, Tarbes et Troyes. There also had been partial interruptions elsewhere or the delivery of energy at cheaper night rates. The energy workers employed at Bayonne sent the keys of their vehicles to the economy minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, as a protest. At Cherbourg the electricity supply of a government deputy was cut.

The presidents of EDF and GDF, Francois Roussely and Pierre Gadonneix, proposed on April 27 an increase in pay of about 2.4 percent (beginning on May 1, with re-evaluation in July). Trade unions are proposing a rise of 6 percent for the 150,000 workers at the two enterprises.

A previous day of action was well supported on April 8, with some 800 electricity current interruptions made at public places, administrations buildings, seats of the right-wing party UMP, and the headquarters of the employers' organisation MEDEF.

A new day of national mobilisation and protests is projected for May 27.

Workers at *La Poste* in France strike against privatisation and job losses

On April 27, four unions representing workers at La Poste, the (CFDT, CGT, FO and SUD), held a one-day strike to denounce restructuring measures of the new financial service branch, the "Establishment de Crédit Postal" (ECP). The creation of ECP is part of new legislation regarding the "regulation of postal activities." An estimated 30 to 50 percent of the employees took part in the strike.

The reform of the financial branch will lead to privatisation and an administration akin to that usual at private banks. For the last 10 years, 10,000 jobs at the financial services have been lost and for 2004 some 730 new job cuts have been announced. The unions fear that by 2007 a further 3,000 of the 20,000 remaining jobs will be lost.

Israeli bank workers step up strike action

Workers at First International Bank of Israel (FIBI) stepped up their industrial action from April 26 by refusing to receive telephone instructions to buy or sell stocks, deal in foreign currency, or deposit or transfer money. The bank workers have also threatened to further escalate their protest after Independence Day, but have not as yet specified how this will be done.

The workforce at FIBI are protesting against management's refusal to grant them one month's pay as a bonus for the bank's performance in 2003. FIBI posted a net profit of NIS 156 million for 2003, compared with a NIS 65 million loss for 2002. The bank's financing profits before allowances rose by 13.6 percent, or NIS 166 million, in 2003 to NIS 1.39 billion. Its operating and other revenues rose by 10.6 percent, or NIS 76 million, to NIS 791 million in 2003.

Strike at bottled water plant in Kenya

Workers from a plant making bottled drinking water in Kitengela, Kenya, went on strike April 27 in opposition to their poor working conditions and the delay in receiving their wages. The strikers kept Jatin Patel, the managing director of the company, the Volcanic Mineral Water Company, on the premises for the first day of the strike.

Media representatives were given a tour of the water plant, with the strikers as their guides. The plant normally produces thousands of bottles of water, most of them sold to the residents of Nairobi, unaware of the bad conditions in which they are produced. With junk vehicles left outside it to rust, the plant looks completely neglected.

The workers at the plant explained that the water is collected from a borehole in Nairobi, and transported to Kitengela by a lorry. The water is poured into a large tank inside the building, where it is supposedly purified. Workers alleged that Patel has neither a licence to bottle water, nor a certificate from the Ministry of Health.

Ghanaian lecturers strike continues

Lecturers at the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) in Ghana are continuing the strike they started in mid-April, despite pressure on them to return to work. The chief director of the ministry of information, Kofi Sekyiamah, has been widely reported as saying there is no need for the strike since the sector minister, Nana Akomea, was taking a personal interest in their case by advocating the school be placed under the Council for Tertiary Education (CTE). It is claimed this will enable the school to benefit from extra funds to address the problem of decaying infrastructure and improve the salaries and conditions of service of the lecturers.

The president of the students' representative council at GIJ, Richard Mensah, has also called on the lecturers to return to work, while agreeing with their complaints on academic facilities.

Air Zimbabwe workers strike

Employees of Air Zimbabwe went on strike demanding a 120 percent pay rise they had been promised this month. The strikers picketed the offices of the airline at Harare International Airport, demanding to speak to the company's CEO, Rambai Chingwena, who failed to appear. Chigwena told the state newspaper, the *Herald*, "The matter is still under consideration because we are still looking at whether we can raise the money that is required."

Teachers end week of strikes in Liberia

Public school teachers in Monrovia, Liberia, have ended a week of boycotting classes to demand 18 months of salary arrears owed by the government. According to a press report they called off their boycott after students held violent solidarity protests, targeting private schools to demand their support. After four years of civil war, with the United Nations attempting to disarm the rebel factions throughout the country, there were fears the demonstrations could get out of hand.

The teachers are said to be holding discussions with government authorities.

President of the Joseph Jenkins Roberts Scholarship Students Association (JJRSSA), Lamii Kpargoi, said the issue at the heart of the conflict is the "equitable redistribution of the nation's wealth." He said that "the payment of huge US dollar allowances to just a few state bureaucrats, and using the bulk of the country's wealth to purchase luxuries for a tiny and selfish portion of the population, were not the right course for any well meaning and responsible government to pursue." He called on the students to use peaceful protest actions.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site