

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

8 May 2004

Italian airline staff hold unofficial strikes

Staff at the Italian national airline Alitalia held three days of unofficial strikes ending on April 30 in an ongoing dispute over the future of the company and the possibility of thousands of job losses. Alitalia plans to shed 16 percent of the 20,000-strong workforce as part of a restructuring of the company in preparation for merger talks with other airlines.

The company was forced to cancel dozens of scheduled flights as a consequence of the stoppage and was only able to offer ten flights—five domestic, four to North America and one to India. The strike cost Alitalia an estimated \$17.74 million each day.

On April 29, staff employed at Rome's Fiumicino airport rejected an agreement between unions, management and the government. Part of the agreement was to hold further talks the following week between the three parties. Striking workers condemned the agreement, with one aircraft maintenance worker saying, "It's not enough for us to know that talks will restart on Monday, we want facts." He added that workers would strike "to the bitter end." Another striker said, "It's up to us workers to tell the union what to do."

The Strike Commission, an official body advising on the legality of industrial action, said that the wildcat action was illegal and demanded that the strikers return to work. The government's labour minister, Roberto Maroni, denounced the strike and warned, "If the illegal stoppages continue, then there's the risk that the talks with Alitalia might not even start."

Alitalia is 62 percent state-owned and is seeking to join a merger between Air France and Dutch carrier KLM. At this stage, the airlines have rejected the offer on the basis that Alitalia is not profitable and carries too much debt. Alitalia has reported an operating loss for the last five years. European Union legislation now prohibits the Italian government from providing the airline with any further state subsidies.

UK Work and Pensions staff hold unofficial strike

On April 29, more than 1,000 employees at benefit offices across the UK took unofficial strike action in support of supervisors who were suspended after refusing to implement a performance evaluation system introduced by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

Staff at social security benefit and pensions offices in Leicester, Scarborough, Sheffield, London and Glasgow were hit by the wildcat action. To date, more than 20 supervisors at benefit offices across the UK have been suspended from work for refusing to cooperate with the new pay scheme. The first supervisors to be

suspended were based in offices in Scotland and in Morecambe in England. Workers in an office in Sheffield walked out when the supervisor there was suspended. The strike then spread to offices in Leicester, London and Glasgow.

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) general secretary, Mark Serwotka, said that the union was seeking to negotiate a settlement with management. A Department for Work and Pensions spokesperson said that it intended to take disciplinary action against members of staff who had participated in the strike.

Bus drivers in Cumbria, northern England, vote to strike

On April 30, bus drivers in Cumbria, northern England, voted to strike in a dispute over pay. The workers employed by the Stagecoach Company are set to strike for 24 hours on May 10. The action will affect bus services across the Cumbrian region, including the towns of Barrow, Carlisle, and Kendal, and the West Cumbria area.

Transport and General Workers Union regional industrial organizer Alan McGuckin said, following the strike ballot announcement, "We have drivers driving 25 people on a bus on £5.40 an hour. Drivers want a decent wage. We don't want to inconvenience people too much. I am sure people will understand that this isn't a frivolous dispute."

The company claimed that it was surprised the strike ballot had been held, arguing, "We had made the pay offer and negotiations finished some time ago and the trade union recommended acceptance of that pay offer."

Arrests at May Day demonstrations in Iran

This year's International Labour Day demonstrations in Iran were marked by police attacks and arrests. Workers throughout the country demonstrated on May 1 against mass redundancies, privatisation and casualisation, for the right to organise and to demand unpaid wages.

Protests in the capital, Tehran, went beyond the narrow limitations of the state-organised "khaneh kargar," calling for an end to child labour, low wages and mass unemployment.

In some cities, demonstrations and protests were attacked by security forces and a number of well-known activists were arrested. In the Kurdish city of Saqez, security agents of the Islamic government and plainclothes police officers attacked the protesters and arrested workers and activists. The event was organised by the First of May Council, an organisation consisting of labour activists acting independently of formal government-controlled structures.

At about 5:00 p.m., the marchers were attacked by the security

forces. Around 50 protesters were reportedly detained and taken into custody. Among those arrested were Mahmoud Salehi, a well-known labour leader who had previously been arrested and imprisoned for 10 months in 2000; Jalal Hosseini, a local labour leader; Borhan Divan Kord; and Mohsen Hakimi, a respected activist, translator and member of the Iranian Writers' Association.

Salehi was badly beaten, and his glasses were broken. Security forces subsequently raided his house where they also beat his wife, Najibeh Salehzadeh, as well as his son, and confiscated his computer and some documents. Hakimi's wife reported that at least until May 3 she had not been given any opportunity to contact her husband by phone, and didn't have any information concerning his whereabouts. The detainees subsequently went on hunger strike, proclaiming their right to celebrate International Labour Day, while their families and others gathered outside the Security Ministry's offices to demand the release of all those arrested.

According to some reports, the arrestees were later transferred to a prison in Sannadaj, and their families were asked for a bail of 200,000,000.00 Tomans (around \$250,000).

Two days before their arrest, both Salehi and Hakimi had met with a delegation from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which had a mission visiting Iran.

Tel-Aviv University attempts to avert strike

Tel Aviv University management met with workers' representatives this week in an effort to avoid a strike over pay. Dafna Shmulevich, management's legal adviser, said, "In its 50 years, the university has never had it so bad that there is even a fear it will be unable to pay next month's salaries."

The university announced May 3 that due to its mounting deficit—which is expected to reach NIS 160 million this academic year—it would lay off 300 workers. The workers officially declared an industrial dispute as of May 4, a legal obligation that allows for strike action following a 15-day "cooling-off" period.

Texaco oil workers strike in Nigeria

Texaco workers in Nigeria have been on strike since April 20, in a long-running dispute over pensions and other benefits. After three years of trying to get a change in management's position, the workers are refusing to return to work until real progress has been made.

In 2001, the workforce asked for talks with management on beginning pension payments, as the company had previously had no pension programme. This was in spite of the company operating in Nigeria for the last 70 years. The workers began an indefinite strike, which was called off after six weeks, when management promised an "in-house" agreement with the union.

Between June 2001 and August 2003, management claimed it was willing to pay into the pension fund but asked for time to draw up a pension programme. Management then sacked 150 of the total workforce of 342 in a "severance exercise" before any pension payments had been made. Another strike was called and another agreement was made with management. Now, this agreement has also been broken by a management attempt to impose the sackings, prompting the latest strike.

Public sector threatens strikes in Kenya

Public sector workers in Kenya are preparing for strike action over low pay and job insecurity. Employees of the energy utility companies, KenGen and the Kenya Power and Lighting Company (KPLC), issued statutory 21-day strike notices last week, threatening to bring the country to a complete halt. They are members of the Kenya Electrical Trades Workers Union (KETAWU).

The energy workers have been joined by communication workers at Postal Corporation and Telcom Kenya, after management continued to insist that 6,000 workers face the sack in a restructuring operation. Telcom Kenya's manager said, "The company has to take this painful step in readiness for acute competition from new entrants into our core fixed line segment."

The 8,000 workers of the Nairobi City Council's water and sewer department are considering industrial action over possible job losses when they are transferred to the privatised Nairobi Water Company. Also, 140,000 government employees, members of the Union of Kenya Civil Servants (UKCS), are insisting that their pay demand for a 600 percent rise must be backdated to July 2003.

Energy Minister Ochillo Ayacko warned that no pay rise for the employees would be forthcoming until the energy sector was revived. The government is adhering to IMF-World Bank directives in carrying out privatisations and public sector job slashing. However, due to its financial problems, it is unable to offer any pay rises that could win union support for the operation. Most public sector workers have received few, if any, pay rises over the last period, and their average wage is now only half that of the private sector for equivalent jobs, according to the Economic Survey for 2003. The government has kept quiet about the contracts of senior parastatal chiefs who were recruited last year as managers for the sectors to be privatised, fearing public outrage at their huge salaries.

Doctors strike at Edo State, Nigeria

All 32 hospitals in Edo State, Nigeria, have been closed this week over the state government's refusal to pay call-duty allowance. The spokesman for the striking doctors, Dr. Ozor Martins, told reporters in Benin City that there were "outstanding arrears that have accrued to doctors for the past three years." Martins explained that only resident doctors were affected and consultants were still working, so patients were not being forced to leave the hospitals.



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