

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

29 May 2004

## French energy workers strike to oppose privatisations

On May 27, energy workers throughout France held a nationwide strike that led to power cuts in several areas. The 24-hour strike is the latest action in an ongoing protest against government proposals to change state-owned power firms Electricité de France and Gaz de France into limited companies. The action resulted in power cuts in several areas in the Paris region, as well as in some areas on the Mediterranean coast.

Workers fear this is the precursor to privatisation and job losses, despite government assurances that it would hold a 70 percent share in the new companies.

During the day, 80,000 power workers protested in Paris. Trade unions estimated that three quarters of the 150,000 staff at EDF and GDF were involved in the action. The CGT trade union said that further stoppages and strikes are planned for mid-June, during the period that the French Assembly is set to debate the legislation on the EDF and GDF proposals.

## Education staff in France strike

Education staff in France held a national strike on May 25 to protest against decentralisation, restrictions in the education budget of 200 million euros for the upcoming school year, and job losses.

The strike is the second since the Easter holiday and was called by education trade unions including the Fédération Syndicale Unitaire (FSU), Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (Sgen-CFDT), Union Nationale des Syndicats Autonomes (UNSA-Education) and Confédération Générale du Travail (Ferc-CGT).

This year, more than 6,000 new teachers' jobs have already been lost, with trade unions estimating that some 20,000 jobs have been axed between June 2003 and June 2004. A further 4,000 teaching jobs are expected to be lost next year.

Trade unions estimated that some 30 percent of the educational staff participated in the latest strike. The previous week, a demonstration of 3,000 was held in Paris against decentralisation.

## Library staff in Kent, England, to strike

Library staff in Kent voted this week to hold a series of 24-hour strikes in a dispute over the restructuring of the library service. The employees voted to strike in a ballot result announced on May 26. More than three quarters of staff took part. The first of three planned strikes is to be held on June 1, and further strikes on June 28 and July 23.

The library staff fear job losses, having to carry out more work for less pay, and poor service for users.

## Nursery nurses in Glasgow, Scotland, continue strike

Nursery nurses in Glasgow voted to reject an offer presented by Glasgow City Council on May 26 to end their ongoing dispute. The nurses have been on strike for more than a year over a pay

deal. They voted to continue the strike at an evening Unison trade union meeting in the city's Royal Concert Hall attended by more than 700 workers. The proposal was rejected by 445 votes to 287.

The council said that the offer was its last, and that it was "dismayed" at the rejection.

Glasgow is one of five areas in Scotland that have not reached local agreements—the others are Edinburgh, Orkney, Renfrewshire and the Borders. The city is the location of a quarter of Scotland's nursery nurses.

At the beginning of the dispute, Unison demanded that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities discuss a nationwide settlement on behalf of all 32 councils. Last month, the union shifted from this position and said it would be in favour of agreeing local deals with employers.

Before the dispute, nursery nurses earned on average £13,000 a year. The union proposed an extra £4,000.

Glasgow City Council said that its offer would have included hourly rates ranging from £8.76 to £10.46 and lump sums of £2,500 for all staff.

## Transport workers in Norway end strike

On May 26, transport workers in Norway ended their five-week dispute, following a tentative agreement between transport workers' unions and employers.

The strike had a severe impact on grocery stores nationwide, with many lacking the most basic foodstuffs.

The main issue in the strike has been to increase the contract benefits of union members in the transport industry, as opposed to workers who are not unionised. There is still no agreement on this issue. Under the agreement, workers are given a nominal pay rise and a fund has been established jointly administered by trade unions and employers. The fund will be used to promote trade union activities.

The deputy leader of the Transport Workers Union said that further discussion would be held on the proposals and that members would be balloted on them in mid-June.

## Irish zinc miners to hold strikes and overtime ban

Workers employed at Europe's biggest zinc mine, Tara Mines, located north of Dublin in the Irish Republic, plan to begin strike action and an overtime ban on June 1 in a longstanding dispute over benefits and workers' rights. The strike is being organised by the SIPTU trade union.

The dispute involves more than 220 workers, who are demanding a sick-pay scheme, improved pension benefits, and increased annual leave.

Tara Mines announced that it had issued "protective notice" to workers and said that its operations would be suspended if the industrial action went ahead. The company said that its planned

production target of 2.66 million tonnes of ore from 2.5 million last year was under threat due to the strike. Tara Mines was bought by Sweden's Boliden group from Finnish company Outokumpu last year.

#### **Zimbabwean telecom workers strike**

Five thousand workers of TelOne in Zimbabwe began an indefinite strike on May 17. The action is in protest against the company's refusal to implement an arbitration decision to increase wages so that the lowest paid would reach the official poverty line.

Gift Chimankire, secretary-general of the Zimbabwe post and telecommunications union CASWUZ, told the *Zimbabwe Standard* (Harare) that the strikers would not return to work until the management reviews the Cost Of Living Adjustment (COLA). He said, "On April 1, it was agreed that the employees would get a rise in their salaries, but now the management is backtracking on their commitment... They are offering something that is far below what was agreed between our arbitrator and theirs."

TelOne employees in Harare were the first to down tools. Later the same week, the strike spread to the smaller towns.

Six union members have already been arrested due to their participation in the strike, and both Chimankire and the CASWUZ President Lovemore Matombo have been threatened with arrest after they were prevented from speaking to workers at the Harare Main Telephone Exchange.

UNI (Union Network International) has written a letter of protest to the company about the arrests and has called on UNI affiliates to send protest letters to TelOne and the Minister of Transport and Communications.

#### **Zimbabwe strikers sacked**

The CIMAS Medical Aid Society in Zimbabwe has sacked 22 of the 103 workers who took part in a strike last month. A spokesman for the society told the *Herald* that the rest of the workers were given written warnings, depending on their involvement in the strike. He said that the workers had been charged and found guilty of sabotage and absenteeism by the company's management.

The strike began on April 15 to demand a salary increase of 155 percent and improved working conditions. Workers said that their present conditions were appalling, while their salaries and allowances were far below those of others in the medical aid sector.

#### **Zambian airport workers end strike**

Following a personal intervention by deputy general secretary of the Zambia Congress Trade Union (ZCTU), Alfred Mudenda, the airport workers at the National Airports Corporation (NAC) have returned to work without winning any of their demands. Mudenda travelled from Kitwe to meet the strike leaders and persuaded them that negotiations would be more successful if they ended the strike.

The Labour and Social Services Minister, Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Kafumukache, praised both Mudenda and the NAC staff for calling off the strike.

Airways and Allied Workers Union of Zambia (AAWUZ) President Happy Phiri told the *Times of Zambia* (Ndola) that operations at NAC were back to normal and that the union would continue with the talks.

The workers had gone on strike to press for a pay rise of K900,000 for all employees, and the removal of the top

management.

#### **Strike of Namibian cold storage workers**

Thirty-eight cold storage workers at Walvis Bay Harbour, Namibia, have been on strike since May 10 over a deadlock in salary and benefit negotiations. They are demanding increases of 13, 12 and 11 percent in different grades, an increase in housing allowances, better medical aid and a bonus for working in cold conditions.

The strike has blocked the movement of all frozen products in and out of Commercial Cold Storage. According to the *Namibian* (Windhoek), pickets have been sleeping outside the cold storage on the harbour quay to prevent any scab operation from breaking the strike.

The strikers told the paper they were fighting for human rights. "We are sleeping here to secure our work and will stay for as long as it takes to reach a solution."

Workers employed by other companies at the port have pledged to join the action and bring the port to a standstill if the issue is not resolved soon. Fishing vessels are waiting outside the harbour for the dispute to be resolved, resulting in substantial losses in harbour fees for NamPort.

Negotiations between the company and the Namibia Transport and Allied Workers Union have been going on since last October.

#### **Zambian academics take strike action**

Lecturers and researchers at the University of Zambia (UNZA) have been on strike since May 14 in support of their demand for an audit on the institution's financial records.

Acting president of the Lecturers and Researchers Union Thomas Mabwe told the *Times of Zambia* that the union strongly believed there was gross financial mismanagement at the university. They want lecturers to benefit from some of the finance generated by the university outside the government grant.



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