

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

25 June 2004

Europe

Norway oil workers expand strike

On June 23, oil workers in Norway expanded their six-day strike that will result in a cut in output of 715,000 barrels per day (bpd) of the country's 3-million-bpd oil output. At present, the strike action is cutting output by 375,000 bpd. There has been speculation that the Norwegian government is considering invoking emergency laws to end the strike.

The strikers, members of the OFS trade union and sister union Lederne, are demanding better pension plans and labour rights for offshore workers. The cut in output is set to begin on June 27. This will include adding Norsk Hydro's Heimdal field to the strike, as well as Statoil's Norne oilfield.

A spokesman for the Norwegian Oil Industry Association (OLF) said that the organisation was considering locking out those workers who are on strike. Such a move would effectively halt all Norwegian oil production. During the last large-scale oil workers' strike in Norway, in 2000, a lockout was announced after 10 days. The government intervened, invoking emergency laws that ended the stoppage after 13 days.

Norway is the world's third-largest oil exporter, with exports accounting for some 20 percent of gross domestic product. The industrial action has led to an increase in international oil prices, with London Brent futures 27 cents higher at \$35.88 a barrel.

Coal miners go on hunger strike in Maritime territory of Russia

Some 82 coal miners at the Rakovsky pit in the Russian Maritime (Primorye) territory announced a hunger strike on June 21. On June 19, 69 miners held a protest in the mine's administration building. Later that day, another 14 miners joined them.

The workers are in dispute over unpaid wages dating back to August-November 2003 and April-May 2004. The miners are demanding all wages be fully paid and that their labour record certificates, currently being held by their employer in Vladivostok, be returned to them.

Rakovsky miners also held a hunger strike in May over unpaid wages and won a partial wage arrears payment.

French power workers continue dispute

On June 16, after 24 hours, the unions Confederation General du Travail (CGT), Confederation Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT), Force Ouvrière (FO) and Confederation Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (CFTC) agreed to continue their dispute against the proposed government privatisation of the Electricité de France (EDF) and Gas de France GDF energy companies.

The same day, Finance Minister Nicolas Sarkozy reiterated the governments' determination to carry out the privatisation. Last week, Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin appealed for the unity of the government and warned that workers in the strikes who had been involved in cutting electricity supplies were "behaving illegally" and should face sanctions.

On the afternoon of June 16, the electricity supply of the Elysée-palace, the Champs-Élysées and the Eiffel Tower was interrupted for 15 minutes. The power of some 52,000 customers, including the headquarters of the

employers' organisation UMP, and the ministries of the interior, of agriculture, and of employment and solidarity, were affected.

Other Paris regions or buildings were affected for one hour, including Madeleine, Concorde, Quai d'Orsay, the embassies of the United States and Great Britain, and several shops and offices. Several dozen gas and electricity workers occupied a facility providing current to the north of Paris from June 15 to June 16.

During the past week, mainly on June 17, workers made numerous cuts to power currents, occupied workplaces and reduced the tariff for poor families. On that day, EDF management announced some 100 legal charges against workers.

On June 18, the supply to 45 well-known people in the Bordeaux region was cut, including the Bordeaux mayor, Alain Juppé, and the former minister of economy, Francis Mer.

One of the occupations was held at Saint-Quen, which produces 20 percent of Paris's current. On June 18, workers ended picketing at the entrance of the nuclear centre of Golfech following a decision of the Montauban court. The strike at the nuclear plants of Bayet and Nogent continued until June 19.

The CGT, the majority union of the public energy sector, did not call for unified actions but asked workers to decide at local assemblies what protests to mount. This resulted in a decrease in the mobilisation of workers during the past week.

On June 21, workers began to reinstate the current of some 250,000 families. Some 30 industrial complexes such as Renault, Lafarge, and Paris Airports were subjected to great energy reductions that day.

On June 22, the unions called for another day of action to be held on June 24. The union has called for the strike movement to continue until July 14 and has said it would protect its members that were taking part in the actions of FO and CFDT.

France's power market is 37 percent open to competition, enabling the country's 3,100 largest companies to choose their power supplier. From July 1, all businesses, or about 3 million customers, become eligible to do the same. EDF will retain a monopoly on households until at least 2007. It sells more than 90 percent of France's electricity, with 27 million customers in France out of around 42 million worldwide.

Siemens's German employees protest threat to jobs

Around 10,000 Siemens AG workers demonstrated June 18 to protest plans by Germany's largest engineering company to shift some production abroad to help cut personnel costs.

Employees at factories from Berlin, where Siemens assembles gas turbines, to Bocholt, where the world's fourth-largest mobile-phone company makes handsets, are staging marches against a relocation plan that Siemens has said may affect 5,000 German jobs. Marches took place in many of the major cities including Cologne, Düsseldorf and Krefeld.

Following the growing trend of German manufacturers—shedding jobs in Europe's largest economy while creating them in the east—Siemens, which employs 167,000 in Germany, is believed to be looking at Hungary as a new location for factories producing phones. Wages in Hungary are at

least 30 percent lower than in Germany.

Net income per 1,000 Siemens employees was 5.9 million euros (\$7.1 million) in the company's most recent fiscal year, compared with \$49.2 million at General Electric in 2003. Sales per 1,000 Siemens employees stood at 178 million euros that year, half the tally for General Electric workers.

Siemens is negotiating with works council representatives and unions to cut pay as the company tries to reduce \$30 billion in personnel costs. The company generates 23 percent of total revenue at home, making Germany its second-largest market by sales behind the United States, where 70,000 people work for Siemens.

Manufacturing work cost an average \$23 an hour in Germany in 2001, more than double the cost in Asian economies except for Japan and Australia, according to the US Department of Labour. Siemens has been hiring workers in China, where it now has 21,000 employees, making it one of China's biggest overseas investors. The company said last month that it intends to invest 1 billion euros in China to help it catch up with Motorola and Nokia Oyj in the world's biggest wireless market by users.

Manufacturing wages in China are about 5 percent of those in the US. Siemens Chief Executive Heinrich von Pierer has said he could hire 12,000 Chinese software programmers for the cost of employing 2,000 Germans. Siemens has 11 percent of its workforce in Asia, which accounts for 12 percent of total sales.

Unemployment in Germany rose for a fifth month in May, and the adjusted figure was 10.5 percent.

Thousands march through London to defend pensions

Thousands of workers, trade unionists, pensioners and supporters staged a march and rally in London on June 19 to highlight the UK's pensions crisis.

Before the rally, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) released figures that revealed that employees in retail and financial services are most likely to have had pensions based on their salary replaced by pensions dependent on investment risks. Lower-paid workers are most likely to have lost pension rights in recent years. Of those earning less than £200 per week, a third fewer now have any pension compared to six years ago.

In her speech to the rally, the USDAW retail and shop workers' trade union president, Marge Carey, focused on the pension plight of female workers. "Women make up over half the population, but the current pensions system assumes a traditional male working pattern of continuous employment from, say, 20 to 65 in full time work.... Women need a system in place that can cater for the reality of women's lives. Women are the poorest pensioners—their average income is only 53 percent of retired men."

Strike at London Underground

More than 7,500 Rail Maritime and Transport union members at London Underground, Metronet BCV and Metronet SSL are poised to strike for 24 hours on June 29-30, following the failure of talks with the three companies to produce agreement on pay and conditions.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow said, "Despite our best efforts, talks with both LUL and Metronet have got us nowhere fast, and our members are now fed up with being messed around.... We want a date for the implementation of a 35-hour week and a date for the start of a four-day week, and we want serious progress on pay."

Action short of a strike, in the form of an overtime ban, will also be taken on Metronet BCV and Metronet SSL for seven days from 6:30 p.m. on June 29

Irish public transport strike looms

In the Republic of Ireland, the National Bus and Rail Union (NBRU) has announced that it intends to proceed with a strike ballot of its members. The strike threat follows a decision by the Department of Transport to award licences to a private operator, Morton's Coaches, for two new services to the CityWest business campus in Dublin. At a

meeting of its executive committee on June 12, the NBRU decided to ballot members on industrial action over the next three weeks.

It would be at least a month before services were disrupted, as a week's strike notice would be served on completion of the ballot. Even at that stage, a total shutdown of services would be unlikely, with a series of "roll-over strikes" envisaged at first, leading to an all-out strike, according to the union's general secretary, Liam Tobin.

The other main CIE union, SIPTU, may also join the strike call, as members of each traditionally support actions taken by the other.

Unions in CIE are opposed to plans by Transport Minister Seamus Brennan to hand over up to 25 percent of the Dublin bus market to private operators. Unions have been engaged in talks with the Department of Transport since March. Speaking after a recent union meeting, Tobin said Brennan was "effectively privatising the network route by route while we talk."

Ongoing industrial action by civil servants in Northern Ireland

NIPSA, the largest trade union in Northern Ireland representing 40,000 members across the civil and public service and the voluntary sector, began strike action last month at nine test-driving centres across the province. It is part of a wider dispute over pay, which began last December.

DVTA centres in Armagh, Craigavon, Lisburn, and Newry are unstaffed, and no testing is taking place. Nor is any testing taking place at Belfast, Londonderry, Larne and Newtownards test centres, but some staff are providing an information service.

About 6,000 MoT tests a week, as well as practical driving examinations, are being affected by the action. NIPSA has been involved in strike action since December over the government's refusal to give civil service staff any cost-of-living increases in rates of pay since April of last year. The government has imposed a pay package that will add 3.6 percent to the wage bill of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. However, union officials say that was part of a pre-agreed increment and takes no account of the rise in the cost of living.

Middle East

Workers shut down Tefahot branches in Israel without advance notice

Protesting workers at the Israeli Bank Tefahot have closed down the bank's branches until further notice. From June 20, all 40 branches throughout the country were closed. The chairman of the workers' union, Shaul Shauli, confirmed that the 650-700 employees will stay away from work indefinitely.

The Histadrut labour federation declared an official dispute at the mortgage bank earlier this month. The dispute involves Tefahot's merger into its parent bank, United Mizrahi Bank.

Shauli has said the decision to close down the branches without prior notice is a response to Tefahot chief executive Eli Yones's decisions regarding the merger, including job cuts.

The workers are also angry at the bank's practice of using temporary workers. Also in contention is the method of bonus payment, which the workforce says benefits mainly senior staffers.

Africa

Nigerian nurses' strike continues

Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) has been brought to a standstill as a result of the nurses' strike that began on June 16. The nurses, who are members of the National Association of Nigeria Nurses and Midwives (NANNM), gave management three weeks' notice of the action. They are protesting against the non-payment of the 22 percent award that was approved by the federal government in early 2003. They are now owed 19 months' salary arrears.

Offices, theatres, laboratories, wards, accident and emergency, pharmacy, maintenance and catering have all been affected by the strike.

Isiaka Busari, spokesperson of the LUTH Medical and Health Worker's

Union, told the *Daily Champion* (Lagos) that they had held a series of meetings with the former minister of health, Prof. Alphonsus Nwosu, without any solution. "This is the third strike on this issue. There have been so many promises at the local and national levels, but none has been kept." He said that the staff at some hospitals had received the increase, "but we have got nothing. This time around, we are determined to get what is our due before the strike can be called off."

The public relations officer (PRO) of the hospital, Ayo Olagunju, has admitted that the nurses have a justified claim, but said that there were no funds to pay them.

On June 20, branch chairman of the nurses' association Victor Vitowanu said the strike would continue until their demands were met. He told the *Daily Champion*, "As professionals whose work is to care for patients, we are aware of the negative effects of embarking on this unfortunate measure, but we have been pushed to the wall, harassed, intimidated, maligned and cheated simply because we asked for our rights and the rights of the patients."

On June 22, the *Vanguard* (Lagos) reported that the LUTH public relations officer, Ayo Olagunju, had dismissed claims that funds meant for staff salaries and payment of the disputed arrears were embezzled. He told the paper, "There was no time the management embezzled any money meant for workers' salary or arrears as claimed by the workers. There is no element of truth in their claims. The truth is that there is a shortfall in the salaries for the month of May and with this short falls there is no way the money would be enough to pay salaries. Already we have informed our parent ministry of which they have promised to look into it."

Nigerian headmasters suspended over strike

Headmasters employed by the Katsina State Primary Education Board have been suspended for taking part in a strike of primary school teachers called by the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT). The strikers are demanding the payment of their "outstanding leave and transport allowances, promotions and salary increases arising from previous staff elevations."

A statement, signed by on behalf of the chairman, Alhaji Shehu Inuwa Imam, announced that all headmasters who allowed the closure of their schools as directed by the state council of the NUT should proceed on indefinite suspension.

According to *P.M. News* (Lagos), local government education secretaries have been instructed to send proposals for the employment of new headmasters, while assistant headmasters should run the schools in the interim.

The NUT executive council has declared that the strike would continue. *News Agency of Nigeria* has reported that an emergency meeting of the union's local government chairmen and secretaries had been called to strengthen the strike.

Ugandan high school staff strikes over pay

Fifty-five teachers at City High School in Kampala, Uganda, held a sit-down strike on June 21, leaving the school's 1,000 pupils without lessons. The teachers were demanding an increase in their allowances.

The teachers told *New Vision* (Kampala) that they needed a "top-up" because last year's PTA increment of sh100,000 had been reduced by one fifth after tax. One teacher told the paper, "There is no reason why we should not be paid well when the deputies are getting eight-fold (about sh600,000) more than us. The money is there."

Nigerian council nurses' strike enters sixth week

Nurses employed by Harare City Council have been on strike since mid-May in support of their demand for a review of their uniform allowances and protective clothing. The strike has brought the services at polyclinics to an almost total standstill.

Earlier in June, the Harare City Council offered to increase the uniform allowance, but the offer was rejected by the nurses, who said it was not enough to buy at least two uniforms.

On June 22, Harare City Council Director for Health Services Dr. Lovemore Mbengeranwa claimed that all nurses have received protective clothing and called on the health staff to resume duties.

Harare Municipal Workers Union Chairman Cosmas Bungu denied that all of the nurses had received protective clothing.

Nigerian lecturers take strike action against sackings

Members of the Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP) at Kwara State Polytechnic began strike action on June 16. The strike is in protest against the sacking of 44 lecturers at the university. AbdulRaheem, the immediate past vice chancellor of the University of Ilorin, under whose leadership the sackings were made, declared that he was only implementing the White Paper of the government on the institution.

Chairman of the Governing Council of the polytechnic, Prof. Oba Abdul Raheem, told a local newspaper that there was no going back on the actions, which had become a subject of litigation.

According to *This Day* (Lagos), sanctions have been taken against 34 members of staff. "Five categories of staff including [one] academic have been dismissed, four others had their appointment terminated, seven on compulsory retirement, 17 issued with yellow card, while another staff got indefinite interdiction."

Nigerian Shell workers take warning strike to avert sackings

Shell workers took 48-hour strike action in three Nigerian cities—Lagos, Port Harcourt and Warri—demanding that management abandon proposed job cuts. The "warning strike" was jointly called by the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGSSAN) and the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers of Nigeria. Strikers demonstrated outside company offices in the three cities.

Lumumba Okugbawa, deputy general-secretary of (PENGSSAN), told *Canadian Press* that the strike was "intended to 'sensitise management' to abandon leaked proposals to cut between 30 and 40 percent of the company's 5,000-strong work force here." The proposals are part of a leaked report entitled "Securing Our Future," which includes downsizing the labour force and increasing production by a half-million barrels a day.

Shell officials claim that no decision has been made on the implementation of the report's recommendations.

South African print workers' strike enters its fourth week

The strike of print workers employed at *Media24*'s plant at City Deep, Johannesburg, has entered its fourth week. The strikers are members of the Chemical Energy Paper Printing Wood and Allied Workers Union and are demanding a 10 percent wage increase.

The union has issued a statement calling on all South Africans "who reject apartheid, discrimination and exploitative wages" to support the strike. The union is demanding an end to the "apartheid wage gap."

In a statement on Wednesday, *Media24* said it was offering an increase of 6.8 percent retrospective to January 2004. Management at *Media24* claim that the union's statement that white workers are paid R3,500 per week while their black colleagues get R700 per week was "defamatory and untrue." They say that other unions at City Deep have accepted 6.8 percent.

The union has threatened to call for solidarity actions by its members at all sister newspapers and a boycott of all *Media24* newspapers if its demands are not met.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions has called for mass support for a march to *Media24* at Auckland Park on June 30. The company has made a statement that it is considering taking legal action.



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