

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

11 June 2004

## Europe

### **French gas and electricity workers continue protests against privatisation**

On June 7, RTE rail electricity workers employed by Électricité de France (EDF) cut electricity supplies at the SNCF and RATP power stations in Paris. SNCF and RATP provide power to Saint-Lazare, Gare de Lyon, Gare du Nord and Montparnasse.

More than 250 trains and half a million passengers on the connections to Cherbourg, Caen, Rouen and Le Havre, and in the Ile-de-France region were affected. At midday traffic ran normally again.

On June 9, there were further power cuts at Sud-west and Pau and at Toulouse airport. The day before outages took place at Lyon, France 3 TV station and other EDF business customers. Similar actions took place in other French towns and regions. Further power outages are planned until June 15.

The Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) trade union is organising the protest against government privatisation measures at Gas de France (GDF) and the EDF. The plans also entail a reform of pension regulations. On June 7, a meeting was held between EDF-GDF worker representatives and Nicolas Sarkozy, the new Minister of Economy. Sarkozy has raised the possibility that the state would retain a 66 percent level of shares in the new company and promised that statutory changes would not affect workers conditions and their pensions. He also said parts of the privatisation would be drawn back in 2007, if a 2006 evaluation did bring not favourable results.

A bill regarding the statutory GDF and EDF changes will be presented on June 15 at the National Assembly.

A national 24-hour strike of the two enterprises from June 14 to June 15 is planned. Regional demonstrations are also set for June 16.

On July 1st, a law regarding the opening of the total energy market to competition from the private sector will

come into force.

The social democrat union Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT) denounced the “savage” action of the workers in cutting power to the railways, claiming it would result in isolating the workers in the opinion of the public.

### **French SNCF train drivers and conductors strike**

On June 2, train conductors and drivers struck in the Lyon region. During the strike, just 25 percent of train services ran.

On June 1, all 182 train drivers located at Saint Etienne began a strike against their personal transfers as result of restructuring in the goods transportation industry and cuts in monthly premiums of about 17 euros. The SNCF must compensate regional authorities for traffic disturbances as a result of the strike. On June 8, management threatened to bring charges against the strikers. An ongoing theme of the right wing Chirac government since its election has been to limit the right of SNCF workers to strike.

### **French deep-sea fishermen protest against diesel price rises**

Deep-sea fishermen blockaded the majority of French southern yacht and sport ports on June 5 in protest against derv (diesel oil) price increases. Fishing boats blockaded some 3,000 boats at the yacht port of Port-Camarque. Ports at La Grande Motte, Grau du Roi, Sète, Port-Vendres, Argèles, Saint-Cyprien and others, were also partly blocked.

The fishermen are demanding financial support as their boats require 1,500 to 2,000 litres a day and fuel prices are increasing at a rate of about 25 percent, compared to 8 to 10 percent last year.

### **Power workers in South Wales hold unofficial strike**

On June 7, 200 workers employed at the Aberthaw Power Station in South Wales took unofficial action in a pay dispute with maintenance contractors. Their grievances are based on the different rates paid to employees of another sub-contractor. The company has

not implemented conditions at Aberthaw that were agreed nationally.

The workers are members of the Amicus trade union, which immediately attempted to call off the strike. GMB union representative Mike Payne also complained, "Unofficial action was taken by 200 Amicus members on Friday, which stopped GMB members going into work. [The Amicus official] said he would be going back on Monday to ask them to go back to work".

### **Union calls off London Underground strike**

This week the Rail, Maritime and Transport union called off a planned stoppage of the London Underground tube network scheduled for June 10. The action was planned for the same day as European Parliament and London mayoral elections.

The union has been in dispute with London Underground over pay and conditions and the length of the working week. Among its demands is a 32-hour, four-day working week. The union has already rejected a three percent pay offer and is calling for a minimum salary increase for station assistants to rise from £19,000 to £22,000.

The strike was called off on June 5, following negotiations between senior London Underground executives and union officials, including RMT general secretary Bob Crow. London Mayor Ken Livingstone encouraged the talks amid concern that strike action would impact negatively on his attempt to be re-elected.

Following the negotiations Crow said, "LU has indicated that it is now prepared to negotiate seriously on all of our aspirations on pay and conditions, including a shorter working week. The door to a long-term deal remains open."

### **Middle East**

#### **Local authorities across Israel threaten strike**

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On June 3, a meeting between Local Authorities Chairman Adi Eldar and Israeli Interior Minister Avraham Poraz, regarding the local authorities' financial crisis ended inconclusively. Eldar said that unless employee salaries are paid by this week, he might call for a strike. Poraz said that he would remove local authority chiefs who do not submit a budget by July 7 removed.

The Histadrut (Israeli union federation) is threatening to call a general strike over the continued withholding of salaries from local authority employees. Histadrut leader Amir Peretz gave the government a week's deadline to fulfill the federation's demands. Peretz has also called

upon Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to dismiss Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, describing him as incompetent.

Peretz and Netanyahu have spent the past few months exchanging accusations over the treasury's budget and cuts to welfare. Earlier this year, Netanyahu vowed to break the power of the labour unions.

Also on June 3, four Kiryat Gat local authority employees began a hunger strike, protesting wages being withheld for the past five months. Kiryat Gat Mayor Aviram Dahari has announced plans to privatise many municipality functions and dismiss 300 workers. Angry workers broke into his office and withdrew to the local community centre.

### **Africa**

#### **Ugandan hospital workers strike over salary arrears**

Hospital workers in Rakai went out on strike on June 8 to protest the non-payment of their salary arrears. They had been promised by President Yoweri Museveni that they would receive their arrears along with their May salary.

Specioza Nassaka, who works as a midwife at the hospital, said, "The only alternative was to put down our tools to show you that we need our money because we face high risks in our job."

District chief accounting officer, Philemon Mubiru, claimed that he would put it in writing that the health workers would receive their arrears at the end of June.

#### **Striking Zimbabwean nurses forced to testify at Labour Court**

Nurses in Zimbabwe, who went on strike in early May to demand an increase of their uniform allowances and the provision of protective clothing, have received a second summons to appear at the Labour Court.

Although some of them have received the protective clothing they need for their job, the nurses refuse to return to work. The amount of the increase in uniform allowances is too small to allow them to buy two uniforms.



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