

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

18 June 2004

## Europe

### French gas and electricity workers step up protests

On June 15, power workers employed by Gas de France (GDF) and Électricité de France (EDF) held a one-day strike in their ongoing protest against the privatisation of the energy sector. The final vote at the National Assembly on the privatisation bill to transform utilities into limited liability companies will be held on June 22.

The Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), Force Ouvrière (FO), the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT) and the Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (CFTC) called the national day of action.

Some 70 regional demonstrations were held in which thousands participated. Workers carried out a number of protest actions, including cutting electricity supplies to the headquarters of the employers' organisation MEDEF and the offices of the right-wing ruling party UMP. Several other private and public facilities were also deprived of electricity and gas. Electricity tariffs were also sold at the lowest rates to poor people in some regions.

On June 10, the toll barriers of the Toulouse-Bayonne street was not allowed to charge drivers for two hours and in the town of Pau entry to EDF headquarters was blocked. The energy supply at the Tarbes-Lourdes airport was interrupted.

On June 13, energy workers welded together the main doors at an energy supplier in Grenoble.

On June 15, following the week of protests, Minister of Finance Nicolas Sarkozy proposed the creation of a "experts commission" to evaluate EDF and GDF financing needs before any opening up to private investments. He said that in each case the state would continue to hold the majority of capital and that no statutory disadvantages for the employees would occur in the future.

The following day EDF employees cut supplies to five nuclear power stations in protest against the partial sell-off of the company. Output was cut by 5,700 megawatts (10 percent of capacity) with EDF's Saint Laurent, Nogent, Chinon, Cruas and Golfech nuclear power plants affected. Workers also cut an export cable to Spain and threatened power supply to Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin's home.

### Demonstrations in Russia oppose attacks on social benefits

On June 10, demonstrations protesting against planned government cuts to social benefits were held throughout Russia.

The proposed legislation would gut many social provisions, including free bus services for pensioners and for disabled people, and cut subsidised medicines and subsidies on electricity and water bills for the poorest layers in society.

Some 1,500 people demonstrated outside the government headquarters in Moscow with similar protests in dozens of other cities and towns. Union leaders have announced that if the cuts are ratified in parliament, they will call for a nationwide strike in September.

### Bus drivers strike in southwest London over union recognition

Bus drivers employed by Mitcham Belle Bus in southwest London struck on June 14 over recognition of the Rail, Maritime, and Transport (RMT) union.

Employees voted 69 to 4 in favour of strike action against the company that operates routes in Croydon, Richmond, and central London. Mitcham Belle Bus has now offered to negotiate with the union if the strike is called off. A 48-hour strike is planned for June 21.

### Union calls off bus drivers' strike

On June 16, the Transport and General Workers' Union called off a planned strike by drivers employed by the First Bus company in Bradford, northern England. Workers at First Bus had voted earlier this month in a dispute over pay. The union suspended the strike for a seven-day period after the company offered a new pay deal. The union will ballot its nearly 500 members at First Bus on the offer.

## Africa

### Union leaders call off Nigerian general strike

Nigeria's two main union federations, the NLC and TUC, called off a general strike, which began on June 9, after only three days. The strike was in protest against a series of petrol price increases, the last of which raised prices by 20 percent on May 29.

The strike was called off despite the fact that an order issued by Federal High Court instructing petrol companies to return to the old price of N38 (\$0.29) per litre had not been complied with by many retailers.

The industrial action was well supported with business activity in towns and cities all over Nigeria coming to a complete halt. The *Daily Champion* (Lagos) claimed that approximately N120 billion was lost to the economy because of dispute.

The paper reported on June 14 that as soon as the strike began

the police “took over every strategic public place, road junctions and installations. They also stationed truck loads of armed mobile and regular police to keep track of the labour leaders, who were being monitored round the clock.”

The same paper reported a statement by University of Agriculture Abeokuta student union (UNAAB): “This is to inform the world at large that five students of UNAAB were shot, 100 arrested, while 100 were seriously injured by men of the Nigerian Police Force during a peaceful demonstration against the hike in fuel prices at Obantoko.”

According to the NLC, the police shot two commercial motorcyclists, Elijah Ani and Ambrose Mamah, in Abuja. Mamah has since died. The men belonged to a group popularly known as Okada, which provided out-riders for the NLC leadership during the strike. Despite being shot in the leg, Ani was arrested and is now accused by the police of armed robbery.

An NLC representative wrote to the police: “We are sad to inform you that our efforts to secure the release of Mr Elija Ani through our lawyer was blocked by the police as the AC (CID) intimidated to him that Ani is being framed for armed robbery.”

Despite the fact NLC president Adams Oshiomhole claims that he was also threatened with being shot by a police officer, he has written to the Inspector General of Police and the Lagos State Commissioner of Police congratulating them on the “mature way” the police handled the strike action.

On June 14, police issued a statement claiming that no one had been killed during the strike.

Hoarding and artificial scarcity of petroleum products have kept prices high in Lagos. Many petrol stations are closed, claiming lack of supplies, whilst a considerable trade in black market petrol is taking place at sites nearby.

In his response to the reports that filling stations were refusing to comply with the High Court Order and none were selling fuel at the old price of N38, Oshiomhole said the agreement with the government and oil marketers was not specific on prices. “The decision of NLC as conveyed in a communiqué and that of CFTU (Congress of Free Trade Unions of Nigeria) as well as the TUC, including the one jointly issued by Labour and Civil Society Coalition, we said prices must go to [the] old level. We did not mention specific price or specific figure.”

#### **Nigerian nurses begin strike after general strike ends**

Nurses at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), in the commercial capital of Nigeria declared their intention to begin an indefinite strike on June 16. According to *Vanguard* (Lagos), “The strike is in protest against the management’s disregard of their plight and the woeful condition of the institution.”

At a press conference on June 15 in Lagos, chairman of the National Association of Nigeria Nurses (NANNM) branch at LUTH, VOA Vitowanu, said, “As professionals whose primary work is to care for patients, we are aware of the negative effects

of embarking on this unfortunate measure, but like I said, we have been pushed to the wall, harassed, intimidated, maligned and cheated simply because we asked for our rights and the rights of patients.”

He condemned the refusal to pay allowances due to nurses at LUTH for two years, adding, “We are being harassed by SSS [State Security Service] officials daily, for no just cause.”

He explained that LUTH, “a one-time centre of medical excellence in West Africa... today has only one functional x-ray machine in the entire complex [and] no single, functional scanning machine. We nurses must shout that the Ear Nose and Throat (ENT) accreditation given to LUTH, one of the few such institutions accredited in West Africa, has been withdrawn, due to ineffectiveness.”

#### **Niger state workers strike**

Workers employed by the 42 local government areas of Niger State have begun an indefinite strike to demand the payment of two months salaries. The strikers have refused to accept the proposal made by the state government that only basic salaries should be paid until the federal government reverses its withdrawal of local government allocations.

The strike began after a warning to the state government that full salaries had to be paid or there would be an indefinite strike.

On June 15, *Vanguard* (Lagos) reported that the strike appeared to be solid throughout the state.

#### **Namibian Meatco workers strike**

Workers on the slaughter-floor at Meatco’s Windhoek abattoir downed tools on June 14. The workers are protesting against the company’s newly instituted “no-work, no-pay principle” designed to force employees to lift an overtime ban. The meat workers are demanding payment of back money deducted from their wages for April 13 to 16, when they did not work overtime.

All slaughtering at the government-owned company has ceased. A spokesman for Meatco told the *Namibian* (Windhoek) that the company “could not do without overtime during peak slaughtering periods.”

During the week in April when the workers were not doing overtime, the company was forced to reduce its slaughter quota from 450 cattle per day to 250. The company will be hard hit by the strike action because they will be forced to pay for the additional grazing time of market-ready slaughter cattle.



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