

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

24 July 2004

Unions at French car parts company agree to end 35-hour week

This week car parts workers employed by the Robert Bosch company in France voted to increase working hours, following an agreement between the CGDT trade union, several other unions and management. The German-owned auto supplier's factory is located at Vénissieux, near the southern city of Lyon.

On the pretext of securing 190 threatened jobs, the union called on workers to increase working hours from the current 35 to 36 hours a week with no accompanying increase in wages. Some 98 percent of the 820 workers employed at the plant voted to accept the agreement.

Marc Saubitez from the CFDT union said of the agreement and vote: "If we hadn't signed the accord, it would have meant the enterprise's slow death from here till 2007/2008." The unions initially signed the agreement in May, with the vote to accept the deal taking place on July 13. The agreement will come into force on January 1, 2005.

The company announced that it had been considering moving production to the Czech Republic, on the basis of securing cheaper labour.

Many employers in France are calling for the 35-hour week law established by the previous Socialist Party government to be scrapped. The agreement between Robert Bosch and the trade unions is viewed as a precedent for establishing similar deals across industry. In an interview last week, President Jacques Chirac said the government did not plan to scrap the law but was considering changing it and easing some of its "restrictions" on businesses.

Civil servants in Northern Ireland continue pay strike

Civil servants across Northern Ireland involved in a pay dispute escalated their action this week. On July 19, members of the public service union NIPSA, employed by the Planning Service, joined the strike.

The strike by the planning office in Omagh, Londonderry, Coleraine and Belfast resulted in delays in the processing of planning applications and a reduction in the level of service provided. NIPSA said that "intensive negotiations have not produced a result so far" and that the pay offer from the government was far from that required by its members.

Civil servants have been involved in sporadic strike action in a dispute dating back to December over the government's refusal to give civil service staff any cost-of-living increases since April 2003. The government has imposed a pay deal on the civil servants, but trade unions say that increase did not take into account the rise in the cost of living.

Greek emergency services set to strike during Olympics

Ambulance crews and other emergency service workers announced this week that they are set to strike during the forthcoming Olympic Games. The decision to strike had been taken in a dispute over extra pay and duties for extra work associated with the Games that are to be held in Greece August 13-29.

Ilias Ioannides, the leader of the emergency service employees, including ambulance teams, paramedics and other medical rescue units, said, "We have decided to strike during the Olympics if we do not get an Olympic bonus like the security forces."

At least 2,600 emergency services workers have been specially trained

to work during the Olympics. The government has refused to make any additional payments to the emergency staff, but has promised the police and other security forces extra payments of up to \$3,000.

British Airways baggage handlers and check-in staff reject pay offer

Baggage handlers and check-in staff employed at British Airways rejected a three-year pay offer from the company this week. The workers, members of the GMB general union, rejected the offer by a majority of 98 percent. The union is now set to begin preparations for a ballot for industrial action.

The TGWU, the largest union at BA, is also balloting for industrial action in the same dispute.

BA claims it has offered a pay deal worth an 8.5 percent over three years or 10.5 percent if the money did not count towards pensions. The GMB disputes this. Spokesman Ed Blissett said, "Both offers are completely unacceptable to the people who keep BA flying. There is money sloshing around at BA for the board, managers and pilots. Some of it must be paid to our members to keep them living above the poverty line."

BA said that it was currently in the process of slashing costs and said that it would be lowering its costs by £300 million in the next two years.

Israeli bank staff to strike

A meeting held July 21 between the Bank Discount employees committee and MI Holdings regarding the conditions required for employee consent to the sale of controlling interest in the bank ended without agreement. The bank staff decided to take strike action.

The bank employees decided to not submit data required to publish the bank's quarterly balance sheet to the Bank of Israel. Consequently, it is doubtful whether employees would allow the publication of the balance sheet for the first half of 2004 (scheduled for next month) that might assist potential buyers. In addition, they have decided to launch a strike in Discount's main branch in Jerusalem, its Haifa branch and in 20 other branches.

The strike is to be extended to the remaining 20 branches beginning next Sunday. Employee Committee Chairman Ricky Becher told Maariv, "If no one will ensure employee rights—then no one will buy the bank. We decided to make a concerted effort to torpedo the sale of controlling interest in the bank".

In a meeting with MI Holdings, the workers demanded a one-time sales bonus, a promise by those acquiring controlling interest to maintain the employee constitution for 10 years, a promise from the buyers to not withdraw dividends and to launch immediate negotiations with employees.

The MI Holdings representatives refused the demand for a bonus. According to them, employees would receive customary options to purchase 10 percent of the sold shares at a 25 percent discount. Discount employees quickly convened a meeting with Bank CEO Giora Ofer and stated that as long as employee demands were not met, they had no intention of submitting any type of information to potential buyers.

Employees at Investec bank also began striking in protest over the

transaction in which Bank Habenleumi would acquire controlling interest of Investec. Investec employees claim that the deal could freeze them out and that bank management refused to include in the sales agreement clauses that would protect bank employee interests.

Zambian civil servants strike to demand housing allowance

On July 20, Zambian civil servants staged a sit-in at the Ministry of Finance in Lusaka to demand payment of housing allowances. Civil Servants Union of Zambia (CSUZ) branch chairman Denham Daurah said the workers would carry on their protest until their demands were met.

Senior government officials at the ministry found that their office doors were also locked.

Zambian Finance Minister Ng'andu Magande denounced the strike as illegal. In an interview with the *Post* (Lusaka) he said, "I told them on Friday that if you want to take any industrial action you have to follow the labour laws. And you know what happens when someone doesn't turn up for work."

The strikers were considering mounting an appeal, after their attempt to compel government to pay the negotiated housing allowances was thrown out by the court. Magande added, "We haven't given them the money because they went to court. They said the rates we were proposing were too low." He claimed the government did not have sufficient funds to increase the offer.

Two days before the sit-in, the president of the Zambia Congress of Trade Union (ZCTU), Leonard Hikaumba, said he would support strikes by civil servants to demand payment of their housing allowance. He said unionised workers who wanted to take action had the support of ZCTU and that they should go ahead.

The Zambia National Union of Teachers (ZNUT) has warned that if government does not honour the payment of housing allowances to teachers, schools may not reopen next term. At the recent ZNUT quadrennial conference held in Ndola, teachers and college lecturers insisted that they would go on a nationwide strike if the government did not pay them housing allowance by the end of August. ZNUT General Secretary Roy Mwaba said strike action was the only language the government would understand.

Nigerian minister held hostage by strikers

According to *This Day* (Lagos), some of the staff at the Ministry of Internal Affairs held their supervising minister, Dr. Iyorchia Ayu, hostage in his Abuja office for about four hours on July 20. Their action was in protest over the non-release of funds meant for the payment of staff financial entitlements. Ayu was forced to abandon his vehicle and sneak into his office amidst boos and jeers. Later his security aides had to break down the gate to let him out in order to attend an official function.

The strikers told the paper that money for the payment of their entitlements had been released in April, but it was lodged in a fixed deposit account by some highly placed staff to accrue interest for them. They said they had been told at a meeting on July 19 between ministerial officials and their union that they would not be paid because the money would not go round. One striker said, "It is not true that not enough money was released for our allowances, but the money released was used to pay people employed through the back door at DNCR [Department of National Civic Registration]."

Nigerian hospital workers deny suspension of their strike

On July 19, health workers on strike at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) disowned an agreement made between the management at the hospital, the government and the national leadership of their union to suspend the 35-day old strike. The workers insisted that the strike had neither been suspended, nor called off.

A joint press conference was addressed by leaders of striking unions LUTH branch, at which the strikers argued that their consent was required before the national leadership could suspend or call off the action. They vowed to continue the strike until all their demands were met.

Nigerian doctors take strike action

Doctors in the Kwara state-owned hospitals have embarked on an indefinite strike in protest against the non-payment of allowances and discrepancies in the salaries of old and new doctors.

Attempts by the Commissioner of Health, Dr. Bola Olaosebikan, to persuade the doctors to call off their strike have failed.

Kenyan sugar workers strike at Nzoia

Workers at the government owned Nzoia Sugar Company in Bungoma district, Kenya, downed tools on July 13 in protest against poor working conditions and non-payment to farmers. The strikers had returned to work after a previous strike action in June this year after management had promised to supply protective clothing—dustcoats, welding masks, overalls, clear goggles, gloves and dust masks. The purchasing manager and safety committee had also been instructed to procure gumboots, security boots and raincoats by July 23.

Union leaders told the *East African Standard* (Nairobi) that management had failed to provide protective clothing, which was compulsory in the Industrial Act. They showed journalists the worn-out boots they said were used while doing maintenance on the plant. The workers said they could not return to work without the necessary protective clothing.

Sugarcane farmers are also angry about the lack for payment for their produce for the last three years. One local farmer, Patrick Wekesa, said, "We are being given empty promises every day that payments are being made this week, yet the weeks have rolled into months." He said some of his colleagues have died as a result of frustrations and stress in the sugar sector.

National chairperson of the Kenya Union of Sugar Plantation Workers (KUSPW), Rosalinda Simiyu, called on the government to immediately sack the company's acting managing director, Josephat Akoyo. She said the union opposed a plan to retrench 510 workers in what the management claims is a "government sanctioned cost cutting exercise."

The government owns 98 percent of Nzoia Sugar Company and plans to privatise it through the Nairobi Stock Exchange. The company employs 1,410 workers plus an additional 7,000 working as casual labourers.

A local union official insisted that the company is making enormous profits and has sufficient sugar supplies in the warehouse. "How can the management say they are unable to pay the farmers?" he said.

Sugar workers at Sony Outgrowers Company (SOC) in the Awendo sugar belt also staged a sit-in for two days starting on July 16, to demand payment of their dues.

South African aluminium workers strike

About a thousand workers at the Hulett Aluminium plant in Pietermaritzburg took strike action on July 19. Dumisa Ntuli, spokesperson for the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) said the workers would continue to strike until their demands had been met. He said: "The strike is about the company failing to close the wage gaps by 10 percent between different grades.... Workers want to close the apartheid wage differentials that existed for over 20 years."

Ntuli accused the company of refusing to negotiate with the union and threatened that if there was no agreement a sympathy strike might flare up in other sectors of the metal industry.

NUMSA also accused the company of not adhering to the Skills Development Act.



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