Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

2 July 2004

Europe

Power workers in France continue protests against privatisation

On June 24, the CGT, CFDT, FO and CFTC trade unions held a day of action against the privatisation of electricity and gas utilities. There have already been action days on April 8 and 22, May 27 and June 15. Participation among workers has been high and their struggle has won support in the population at large.

Part of the campaign is termed “Robin Hood of the Forests”, after the English folk hero who stole from the rich and gave to the poor, and involves restoring electricity supplies to families who had previously been cut-off. The CGT is also campaigning for “Operation vitale”—supplying hospitals and other urgent services with free current for 24 hours. Other protest measures include reducing productivity, petitions to President Jacques Chirac, and local and regional demonstrations.

On June 23, the right-wing parties UMP and UDF voted in the National Assembly for the first article of the law allowing the transformation of the gas and electricity companies into private firms.

On June 24, access to Cattenon nuclear centre was blocked, resulting in some 80,000 households in the Marseille region having their tariff lowered. Strikers also occupied the Allauch electricity depot and stations at Fos-sur-Mer and Manosque. In the afternoon a meeting of power workers was held adjacent to the National Assembly in Paris.

Throughout the campaign the CGT, the majority union, has refused to call for a unified strike of all power workers. Its energy sector leader, Frédéric Imbrecht, said that smaller actions would be more effective.

On June 29, demonstrations and blockades involving thousands of EDF and GDF workers were held. The same day parliament agreed by a large majority to the transfer of the two public enterprises to a joint-stock-company.

London Underground workers bring capital to a standstill

Members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union on the London Underground struck on June 30 in an ongoing dispute over pay and conditions. The 24-hour stoppage began at 18.30, following the failure of last minute negotiations between the union and management.

The strike shut down virtually the entire Tube network. London Underground only ran a “very limited service” between restricted stations. The Transport for London group said 30 percent of trains ran and every available bus—an extra 1,000—had been “scrambled”. An estimated seven million people used buses during the strike, one million more than usual and the highest total for 50 years. The head of economics at business group Numerica said the strike would cost the London economy £100 million in lost fares and productivity.

The RMT said the strike was “solidly supported” by thousands of drivers, signallers and maintenance staff.

Workers established picket lines outside stations across the capital. In Leytonstone, east London, pickets displayed a banner that said, “Eleventh commandment—Thou shalt not cross a picket line”. This was in response to London Mayor and Labour Party member Ken Livingstone, who had stated prior to the strike he would have gone to work and broken the strike if he had been a member of the RMT.

London Underground Limited said that the deal on offer to workers would allow a pay rise of 3.5 percent over the next year and reduce the working week by two-and-a-half hours by 2006. The union has rejected this claim on the basis that it had “strings” attached and that 800 job could be lost.

Livingstone has admitted that 200 jobs would be shed under the agreement. He also rejected RMT demands for a four-day week, saying it would lead to an increase in tube fares.

The RMT has called for Livingstone to personally become involved in the dispute—despite his earlier comments on strikebreaking. RMT General Secretary Bob Crow said: “We need someone with the authority and the inclination to hammer out a deal. Instead, we continue to bang our heads against a brick wall with a management that Mr Livingstone once dismissed as dullards and knuckleheads.”

Middle East

Israeli workers protest hospital closure

Hundreds of employees of HMO Kupat Holim Clalit took over the management building of the company on June 26 in Tel Aviv. The workers were protesting against the decision to shut down Sharon Hospital in Petah Tikva and against the recovery programme initiated by CEO Ze’ev Vurembrand.

Chairman of Clalit’s union, Prosper Ben-Hemo, said: “Vurembrand is acting aggressively. We demand of him to keep the Sharon Hospital open and to commence negotiations with the workers.”

Marry Pinto, union chairman at Rabin Medical Centre in Petah Tikva said: “Our struggle is for the sake of the patients and those insured by Clalit. We have no room to admit patients in our hospital so what would we do if the Sharon Hospital shuts down? The whole health system is being destroyed.”

Rahel Ziv, union chairman at Meir Hospital in Kfar Saba, also attacked Clalit management decision saying: “The public should know that Vurembrand’s reforms will result in the death of patients.”

On June 14, Vurembrand announced that the Sharon Hospital is to be closed in an attempt to make the system more efficient and reduce the HMO’s debt, which is estimated at NIS 450 million. According to the announced plan, the hospital will shut down gradually. At first, the emergency room will close during night shifts while other department hospitals will shut down completely. The hospital is slated to closed down completely by the end of 2006.

Israeli bank workers protest merger plan

Investec Israel employees stopped work on June 29 for an hour, leaving the bank's headquarters on Rothschild Blvd. in Tel Aviv for a protest demonstration.

The bank workers decided to demonstrate after a meeting the day before with First International CEO David Granot, who told them that supporting staff with no connections to customers would have to leave the bank. (First International Bank of Israel recently acquired Investec Israel.) This is the first time that employees at Investec Israel have taken strike action.

Port Authority chairman denounces privatisation legislation

Despite a court injunction, Israeli longshoremen are threatening strike action against government privatisation plans. Port Authority Chairman Dan Tichon labelled the initial stages of the port reform legislation in the Knesset Finance Committee "a declaration of war" and warned that the longshoremen will go on strike shortly.

Tichon said: "A month ago, the workers and the Treasury nearly reached a compromise, but everything fell apart as a result of the political changes."

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon personally intervened in the ports crisis last week and pledged that Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would speed up reform legislation. Meanwhile, the port workers union is planning to approach National Labour Court president Steve Adler with a request to allow them to strike, after the court ruled out such a strike in May. Senior union officials have threatened to go on strike even without the court's approval, should the Knesset proceed with the reform legislation. The Histadrut union federation is unlikely to approve a strike against the court injunction.

David Peretz, chairman of the Haifa port workers union, said: "The Treasury is purposefully dragging its feet. It had no intention of reaching an agreement with us ...We will wait another week and give the finance committee a chance to resolve the crisis. If there will be no positive results, the strike will be likely renewed."

Government sources said on June 29 that the finance committee's chances of meeting the July 8 deadline are slim.

Palestinian workers march against unemployment

On June 22, Palestinian trade unions staged a march that included hundreds of unemployed workers in various Gaza Strip districts. The demonstrators marched in front of the Palestinian Authority's cabinet building in Gaza City.

Union chairman Rasem Al-Bayari said that the march was meant to display the workers' suffering as "a result of the Zionist arbitrary measures" that closed work opportunities before them and to demand a Palestinian Authority solution to their problems. He said the union would continue campaigning for jobs for those workers, arguing that the question should be awarded top priority.

Workers demanded the PA cabinet provide work for them and extend urgent relief aid to their families. They delivered a message to the council of ministers, in which they demanded an extraordinary cabinet session provide assistance.

Africa

Nigerian manufacturing workers strike over dangerous conditions

Over a thousand employees of West Africa Household Utilities Manufacturing Company (WAHUM), based in Lagos, Nigeria, are protesting dangerous working conditions. They have been on strike since June 24.

The WAHUM workers say that company management is "callous". As an example, they cite a faulty plate-cutting machine that "amputates" their limbs. The management have neither fixed the machine, nor paid compensation to the victims. Some of the workers have missing fingers in proof of their grievances.

Workers say that management's attitude to their welfare is one of indifference, relying on the use of around 1,000 casuals in contravention of Nigerian labour laws.

"We are suffering in silence. We want the NLC to come to our aid once again. Our limbs are being cut off by this dangerous machine. We have asked them to replace the dangerous machine but they have refused," said one worker.

Attempts by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Productivity to inspect the faulty machine have been resisted by the management.

Four hundred Kenyan tea workers on strike

Four hundred workers are on strike at the Mau Tea Farm in Kenya. Their employer, the Multipurpose Savings and Credit Cooperative Limited, has declared that the workers will have to reapply for their own jobs after they refused to comply with a return-to-work notice. It has brought in 200 casual workers from a neighbouring company.

Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union branch secretary in Kericho Jonathan Ndukwe told the strikers not to reapply for their jobs because the union was handling their case.

Ndukwe said the dispute was the result of management's refusal to pay workers their new salary levels, in accordance with a deal five months ago. Management had agreed to an eight percent salary increase after talks between the union and the Kenya Tea Growers Association. The firm later said that it was unable to honour the agreement, provoking the current strike. Ndukwe said that the strikers were ready to return to work and await the outcome of arbitration.

Mobile phone workers strike in Zimbabwe

Employees of the mobile phone operator Net One in Zimbabwe have been on strike since mid-June to demand a cost of living increase to protect their wages from hyperinflation.

Net One claims that the strike is illegal and has said that it is suspending more than 50 of the workers involved. Management has offered a 40 percent salary increase, but the workers are demanding 500 percent, so that the lowest paid employee will get $Z800,000 ($US150) a month.