

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

30 July 2004

## Europe

### **Job Centre and benefit staff in England to strike**

Job Centre and benefit office staff in the UK are set to strike for 48 hours on July 28, in a long-standing dispute over a pay deal imposed last year. An estimated 100,000 staff in job centres and benefit offices are expected to participate in the stoppage. The workers are members of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS). The action will be the third in a series of strikes, with others held in February and April.

Last year the Department of Work and Pensions imposed a new pay scheme, the Performance Development Scheme. The union says it is based on quotas, so that no matter how well people work half of all staff will receive a lower bonus, and criticised this as “unfair and divisive”.

As a result of the 2003 pay deal, workers are recruited on very low starting salary of £10,300.

This week PCS leader Mark Serwotka called on Work and Pensions Secretary Andrew Smith to intervene in the dispute and pleaded for “serious talks” to be held. In a recent poll ahead of the strike by the PCS’s 97,300 members, 98 percent said they had no confidence in senior management.

The Department of Work and Pensions said contingency plans were in place for the strike, the same as those used during the two previous walkouts when they claimed that 90 percent of offices were kept open.

### **Ambulance crews and paramedics strike in Greece**

On July 27, ambulance crews and paramedics in Greece held a four-hour strike to demand bonus payments for extra work due to the Olympic Games. The games are to be held on August 13-29.

The government has refused to make extra payments to the workers. It has, however, promised bonuses of €2,400 to more than 40,000 police, coast guard officers and firefighters on duty during the events.

In separate industrial action, doctors in the Athens and Piraeus areas held a six-hour strike on July 28 and

rail workers were due to strike on July 29.

### **Health workers strike in Campania, Italy**

Health workers in Campania, Italy struck 1,200 private casualty wards, on July 22 in a dispute over pay and conditions. Five thousand workers participated in the strike to protest the lack of reimbursement of 14-15 months wages by the Regional Council. Other grievances, according to the regional Federlab trade union chairman Enzo D’Anna, are, “bad management by certain ASL general managers who do not respect even the guidelines set out by the regional Health Councillor.”

### **Bus drivers in South Yorkshire, England continue strike**

On July 27, striking bus drivers in South Yorkshire rejected a new pay offer from the First Group bus company. Bus drivers are currently engaged in an indefinite strike against the company that began on July 22.

The Transport and General Workers Union said that it rejected the proposal because its members were being asked to forfeit sickness benefits. The offer from First stipulated that it would withhold payment of the driver’s first day of sick leave to backdate a 30p an hour increase. The union is also calling for a reduction in the working week and better prospects for new drivers.

Last week First announced that managers would be called on to drive buses, with a free service offered in an attempt to bust the strike. The company said that it was still working out how many buses it would require to be used in such a strikebreaking operation.

An estimated 100,000 and 150,000 passengers a day are being affected by the industrial action.

### **Customer service workers at Eurostar to vote in dispute over pay levels**

Customer service staff employed by Eurostar, the cross-Channel train service, are to ballot for strike action in a pay dispute. Staff are based at terminals in

Waterloo, London and Ashford in the south of England.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union stated this week that its 150 members were on “scandalously” low pay and paid different rates for the same jobs. The RMT said that Eurostar recruited staff in Ashford, Kent, on salaries of £13,000 a year—unchanged from a decade ago—and £4,000 a year less than their colleagues in Waterloo, London.

## **Africa**

### **One-day strike against low pay in South African engineering**

Over 20,000 South African workers in the engineering and metal industries were expected to hold a one-day strike on July 29 to demand a 12 percent pay increase. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) were due to hold a protest march in Johannesburg with members of United Association of South Africa (UASA) taking strike affecting that would affect all shifts.

The planned NUMSA march was to start in downtown Johannesburg and end at the Steel and Engineering Industry Federation of South Africa (SEIFSA) offices, where union representatives would hand in a memorandum.

Recently, SEIFSA increased its offer on wages from 4.7 percent to 7.1 percent, but the anger already generated among the workers makes any climbdown by the union very difficult.

NUMSA spokesman Dumisa Ntuli said that the two parties would meet again the day after the one-day action and the union would only then decide its response to the new wage offer. The parties have been in negotiations for the past two months.

Ntuli said the union had been disappointed by the rise in temporary and casual employment, “Our members were promised sustainable jobs, but that has not been realised.”

The union is negotiating for a nine percent wage increase across the board, while the employers were until recently offering just over half that amount.

Meanwhile in the automotive sector, NUMSA put strike action of its 21,000 members on hold after the Automobile Manufacturers Employers Organisation put forward a revised pay offer. The union had asked for a nine percent across the board wage increase and the employers, representing major car manufacturers Volkswagen, DaimlerChrysler, BMW and Toyota, had

only offered 6.5 percent. Details of their revised offer have not yet been revealed. The union has also been in dispute with employers over provision of antiretroviral drugs to HIV/AIDS-infected employees.

### **South African local government workers strike**

Around 200 local government workers in Mtubatuba, South Africa, went out on strike on July 26. The action was in opposition to their low salaries and the recent arrest of workers blamed for corruption.

The strikers protested outside the municipal buildings, and called a meeting with local officials to address their complaints. They said their pay has not been increased for five years. They also voiced their anger over the arrest of local traffic officers the previous week. The officers had appeared in court on charges of corruption, alleged to have taken place at the Mtubatuba driving test centre.

Services in the north coast town were halted by the protest and businesses complained that their refuse had not been collected. The workers later returned to work, after being assured that their grievances would be addressed. Negotiations on salaries are continuing.

In South Africa’s public sector as a whole unions have threatened strike action if their demand for an 8.5 percent salary increase is not met. The government has offered only 5.5 percent. Public Service and Administration Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi declared that the government was in dispute with the public sector unions, saying that wage negotiations were “not achieving anything”. The Congress of South African Trade Unions has called on the ruling party, the African National Congress, to intervene in this protracted wage dispute.



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