

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

28 August 2004

Spanish tow truck drivers strike

On August 26, the Spanish government mobilised 180 army tow trucks in an attempt to break a strike by private recovery company drivers. The strike is being supported by drivers in half of Spain's 16 autonomous regions—the Basque Country, Asturias, Madrid, Catalonia, Aragon, La Rioja, Castilla y Leon, Valencia, Seville, Cordoba and Cadiz. Drivers are also set to strike five other regions of Spain—Andalusia, Cantabria, Murcia, Galicia and Navarra.

The tow truck drivers are demanding that insurance companies pay between 44 and 66 euros per pick-up instead of the 25 euros they are paid now.

The government is also planning to use fire engines and council tow trucks to remove disabled vehicles from roadways. Long delays are expected on roads and motorways as thousands of people return from their annual holidays to face broken down cars left stranded on busy motorways. The recovery drivers association said that some 1.5 million motorists could be hit by the action this weekend.

Insurers said on August 27 that they would cover the cost of broken-down motorists who are left stranded for the duration of the industrial action. Up to 165,000 calls requesting assistance from tow truck companies are made across the country each day at this time of the year in Spain.

Trade union confederations in Holland set strike dates

Trade union confederations in Holland this week called for a day of industrial action on September 20 to protest government cuts and economic policies. The FNV, CNV and MHP confederations estimated that some 20,000 protesters would participate in the Rotterdam protest, timed as the government unveils its 2005 Budget. The FNV-affiliated trade union Abvakabo stated that public sector workers will account for about half of the protesters in the city, with large numbers of government and local council

workers, plus health sector staff expected to strike.

A further demonstration is to be held on October 2 on the Museumplein in Amsterdam, with more than 10,000 people expected to attend.

One of the reasons for the protest is that the government has refused to lower the age that workers can take early retirement—part of an agreement it negotiated with unions last year in return for implementing a two-year wage freeze. Also involved in the dispute are cutbacks to the worker disability pension scheme and unemployment benefits.

The Dutch government plans to implement budget cuts extending to almost 21 billion euros between now and 2007.

Postal workers in Bristol, England, vote to strike

On August 25, the Communication Workers Union in England announced that postal workers at Bristol's Fishponds depot claim have voted to strike in a dispute over pay. Workers voted overwhelmingly in support of strike action to be held on August 27 and August 31.

The vote follows a dispute whereby workers claim not to have received a £26 a week pay rise they were promised for changing to a single delivery system. The Royal Mail said that it planned to continue talking to the CWU regarding ending the dispute and that it was "already making contingency plans if action is taken."

Stagecoach bus drivers in northeast England vote to strike

Bus drivers employed by Stagecoach in the northeast of England voted in favour of strike action this week. The workers are set to hold two days of strike action on September 10 and September 17 in a pay dispute.

The vote was announced this week following a breakdown in negotiations between the Transport and General Workers Union and Stagecoach. It involves more than 900 drivers at four depots in the region—Slatyford and Walkergate in Newcastle, Sunderland and South Shields. The union and Stagecoach are to meet on September 3 to discuss the

dispute

Botswana diamond miners strike over pay

Some 1,700 mine workers employed by Debswana at Botswana's four main diamond mines are continuing their strike action. All sections of the workforce, including plant workers, engineers, nurses and doctors, have joined the strike. The members of the Botswana Mining Workers Union (BMWU) are demanding an increase in their salaries and bonuses and are manning checkpoints at the mines in Orapa, Jwaneng, Letlhakane and Damtshaa.

Management provoked the strike by withdrawing their offer of a 10 percent increase in salary and a one-off bonus equal to 10 percent of annual pay. Management had threatened to withdraw the offer if the workers had not accepted it by August 11. "We want money, we have realised that we cannot compete with the law. We have been denied our rights," one striker said.

The Industrial Court declared the strike illegal on August 6. On August 18, the court found the union in contempt of court for disobeying the earlier order, and found the union officials guilty of encouraging the strike. The union officials are to appear in court on September 2 to argue against this decision. They had been ordered to write a statement to the strikers by midnight, August 22, directing them to comply with the court order, and to call a meeting with the membership for the same purpose.

At the BCL mine in Selebi-Phikwe, management recently suspended the entire union leadership for refusing to divulge how they obtained a copy of the management's wage structure. Botswana's mining companies have the widest wage disparities in the country.

South African food workers strike

Food workers at Irvin and Johnson in Woodstock, Cape Town, walked out on strike on August 19 to demand a higher pay rise. The strikers are members of the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU). Local FAWU branch leader, Thabo Moselane, blamed the "bad faith negotiations" by company officials for causing the strike.

After rejecting the original management offer of 6.5 percent on August 17, the union sent a notice saying a strike would begin on August 19 unless the offer was increased. The company asked for a delay to

reconsider, but then put forward an identical offer. Moselane said that this angered the workers, and they insisted on striking to win an increase of 7 percent, without the delay in the increase as proposed by management. Management are now said to be asking the Labour Court to intervene in the strike on their behalf.



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