

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

4 September 2004

UK prison service maintenance workers strike

Maintenance and agricultural workers—including cooks, plumbers, electricians, plasterers, roofers, gardeners and farm workers—employed by the Prison Service in the UK ended their strike on September 2. This is the second strike since May and involved more than 4,000 workers at more than 130 prisons. The service drafted in prison officers to work in kitchens in an attempt to break the strike.

The workers are members of several trade unions, including Amicus, the GMB, the TGWU and UCCAT. Amicus rejected a previous offer from the Prison Service, describing it as “insulting.”

The union claims that the Prison Service’s pay offer amounts to just 1 percent for many maintenance staff, while prison officers received 2.8 percent for the same period. Unions and management are set to meet again this week for talks.

Eurostar workers in England strike in pay dispute

On August 28, customer service and platform staff employed by the cross-channel train service Eurostar struck in a dispute over pay and grading. The strike caused disruption to the service, with an estimated 140,000 people expected to use London to Paris and Brussels services on the Bank Holiday weekend.

The workers are striking over differences in pay and grades at Eurostar stations in London Waterloo and Ashford in Kent. Workers at Ashford are on lower rates of pay to their London colleagues.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) said that the “action on August 28 was well supported at both Ashford and Waterloo. In the afternoon members marched through the Waterloo Terminal with flags flying and whistles blowing. Management was only able to keep the service going by flouting their own rule book and group standards by using unqualified management staff in Safety Critical roles.”

On August 31, the union announced that it is to ballot a further 375 of its members at Eurostar following the “failure of management to deal with outstanding items from the 2003 pay claim including: Terminals pay (Rate for the Job), lack of travel facilities for non-protected staff, office staff hours of work, office staff pay structure.” These include 300

engineering and maintenance staff at North Pole International, north London and office staff.

Norwegian offshore oil rig workers strike continues

A strike by Norwegian offshore oil rig workers entered its second month this week, with employers threatening a lockout.

The industrial action involving 200 workers began on July 2 and was called by the Norwegian Federation of Oil Workers Unions in a dispute over contracts and job security. The stoppages have resulted in the closure of several mobile drilling rigs on days when strike action has been held. The action has not affected current Norwegian oil production of three million barrels per day, as the rigs drill wells, rather than produce petroleum.

In mid-August the Norwegian Shipowners Association announced that it planned to lock out another 300 of the workers at midnight on September 2 unless a settlement was reached. The majority of these 300 staff are employed on drilling rigs, although the shipowners called for a lockout on the Petrojarl I production ship. The Petrojarl I produces about 30,000 barrels a day for the Norwegian state oil company, Statoil.

Due to safety measures, it can take up to 10 days or more from the start of the lockout to shut down the oil rigs. If the strike continues it is expected that scheduled new production wells will be halted and thus reduce Norway’s planned output.

Trade unions call strike of France Telecom workers

Several trade unions in France, including the CGT-PTT and the CFTC, have called a 24-hour strike involving France Telecom employees for September 7. The strike is to protest government plans to privatise the public telecommunications operator. It is feared that privatisation will result in job losses and poorer working conditions.

This week French Finance Minister Nicolas Sarkozy announced that the state was to sell at least 9.6 percent of its stake in France Telecom, reducing its holding to between 41 and 43.5 percent. France Telecom’s budget for this year already calls for the shedding 14,500 jobs worldwide, including 8,800 in France. The company is also planning to create 1,400 new jobs this year.

Botswana miners still on strike in spite of intimidation

Thousands of diamond miners employed by the Debswana Diamond Company are still on strike in Botswana, in spite of efforts by the company and the courts to intimidate them into returning to work. This has now become the longest running strike to affect the diamond mines.

One of the methods of intimidation used was to send letters to around 1,000 of the strikers, informing them that they have been dismissed. Debswana has also evicted striking workers from their company-owned homes.

Debswana's 5,000 workers went out on strike on August 23 over pay and bonuses, refusing to accede to a court ruling on August 6 that any strike would be unlawful.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) said the forcible evictions of strikers were still going on, warning "such developments could have serious social consequences on the stability of the region." The body also said that workers had been sent in as replacements "without a proper grasp of health and safety" to work alongside those miners that did not join the strike or had returned to work. This had reportedly led to "two deaths and a higher rate of accidents in the last few days."

The ICFTU says that the court ruling that any strike by the miners would be illegal contravened the Botswana government's claim to uphold international labour rights. The Botswana Mining Workers Union (BMWU) is trying to get the government's ruling overturned in the courts.

Thirty-three leaders of the BMWU were scheduled to appear in separate cases before a judge on September 2, facing charges of contempt of court for not calling off the strike. 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 the following Sunday for the same purpose.

The BMWU says its workers will return to work if the court case against its leaders is dropped and all dismissed staff are rehired. Debswana claims that some workers are drifting back to work anyway, and refuse to negotiate until all the workers have returned.

While the union wants to see a 16 percent salary increase and a 35 percent annual bonus, Debswana is offering only a 10 percent wage rise and a one-off 10 percent bonus.

Botswana is the world's largest producer of uncut diamonds. Debswana is an equal partnership between South Africa's De Beers group and the Botswana government. The strike forced two of the main mines—Jwaneng and Letlhakane—to close temporarily. One of the smaller mines is still closed. The strike has already meant that the company is unlikely to meet its 2004 production and sales targets.

Zimbabwean funeral workers strike over broken promise

Workers at Zimbabwe's largest funeral company, Doves

Crocker Morgan, went on strike on August 30, after a promised 25 percent pay rise failed to show up in their pay packets.

The company normally conducts 20 burials a day, but only five burials were conducted on the first day of the strike.

The union chairman for the 450 workers said: "We downed tools today after realising that management had failed to effect the 25 percent increment awarded to us. The industrial action has affected all Doves branches and we will only return to work after management pays."

The funeral industry as a whole had agreed to pay its workers a 25 percent salary increase to mitigate the effects of hyperinflation.

Police tear gas former rail workers protest in Mozambique

Police attacked about 1,000 former employees of the Mozambican port and rail company, CFM, as they assembled outside the cemetery in Biera protesting over the terms of their redundancy payments. Claiming that the protesters had no authorization to hold a public meeting, the police fired warning shots into the air as well as tear gas. Workers had traveled hundreds of kilometers to hear the latest results of negotiations over severance pay. CFM employed 19,000 workers in 1988, but has reduced its workforce down to 4,000 this year. Management claim that it has paid out better retirement terms than it is obliged to do under the country's labour laws.

Kenyan council workers strike over pay arrears

Council workers at Kisumu, Kenya, walked out in protest over non-payment of Sh87 million (\$1.09 million) in salary arrears. Management claimed the strike was illegal and said that the money had already been sent to the workers' banks. The workers' union had earlier rejected proposals that they should be paid in installments on a department-by-department basis.



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