

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

10 September 2004

## Europe

### German workers and youth continue protests against welfare cuts

On September 7, more than 70,000 German workers and youth protested in some 22 cities and smaller towns nationwide in the latest protests against Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's Social Democratic-Green Party governments' planned social welfare cuts known as the Hartz-IV measures. The demonstrations were the latest in a series of weekly events known as the "Monday Demos", which have continued over the past five weeks.

The Schroeder government plans to slash welfare spending by means testing claimants and demanding the unemployed do charity work. Included in these changes are measures to create a broad low-wage sector in the domestic economy, which will then be used to put pressure on wage levels as a whole.

An estimated 12,000 people protested in Leipzig, while 7,000 and 6,000 demonstrated in Berlin and Magdeburg respectively. In the state of North Rhine Westphalia, a total of 15,000 demonstrators turned out in 40 towns. Protest organisers stated that the demonstrations will continue up to January 1, 2005 when the cuts are due to be implemented. Unemployment in Germany stands at more than 10 percent nationwide but is almost double that in eastern Germany.

### France Telecom workers strike against privatisation plans

France Telecom employees held a 24-hour strike on September 7 to protest government plans to privatise the public telecommunications operator. The strike was called by a number of trade unions with members at the company, including the CGT and the SUD-PTT. A demonstration of 500-600 people was held in the capital Paris, with other protests held in towns, including Rennes, Nantes, Tours, Caen, Orleans, Bordeaux, Toulouse and Pau. The CGT said that between 30 and 70 percent of the workforce participated in the strike, with turnout varying among local branches.

The industrial action was called following a statement by the government on September 1 that it intended to reduce its stake in France Telecom to below 50 percent. The 2004 budget for France Telecom also includes the elimination of 14,500 jobs worldwide, including 8,800 in France and the creation of just 1,400 new jobs this year.

### Construction workers in Dublin, Ireland take unofficial strike action

An unofficial strike by up to 2,000 construction workers in Dublin, Ireland was held on September 6. Employees at Pearse construction sites across the city walked off the job in a dispute over holiday pay, overtime and the use of sub-contractors. Later that evening company management met with officials of Ireland's biggest trade union, SIPTU, and agreed on a settlement to the strike.

## Middle East

### Iranian workers stage protest over social security status

Around 150 workers at the Kashan Textile Factory in Kashan, Isfahan province, gathered on September 5 in front of the provincial department of the Iranian Social Security Organisation to protest against not being

included in the category of "arduous labour". The workers are also demanding that their unemployment period should be counted toward their categorisation as arduous labourers. There are approximately 45,000 workers employed in the 700 factories of Kashan.

One worker told a local media outlet, "The Social Security Organisation has recognised us as 'arduous laborers' and we paid the fee they charged for the insurance service. Now, when we have become unemployed, they do not account our record at the same category".

The Social Security Organisation recognises about 350 workers of Kashan Textile Factory as "arduous labourers".

### Council workers in Yehud, Israel hold lock-in protest

On September 7, about 120 local council workers barricaded themselves in the municipality building of the Israeli city of Yehud. The workers, who have not been paid for seven months, brought gas canisters into the building with them.

Police removed the workers from the building by force a few hours later.

Following the protest, the Interior Ministry stated that it had budgeted NIS11 million to pay five months of back salaries, but the funds had been seized by the city's creditors. According to a law passed recently, funds earmarked for municipal payrolls are to be deposited in a separate city account from which they are to be disbursed directly to the workers. But a legal loophole has allowed creditors to seize the money.

The city has turned to the courts to demand the seizures be stopped, but the next hearing will not convene until mid-October. The workers will not be able to receive their salaries before the hearing. Yehud—a city of 30,000 near Petah Tikva—has a budgetary deficit of over NIS100 million, in addition to some NIS70 million it owes the banks. One of the greatest economic problems faced by the city is the apparently large number of political appointments from 1993-1998, when the city payroll doubled to 500.

## Africa

### Strike at Kenya research institute

Workers at the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (Kari) went on strike on September 7 to demand higher pay. At the National Agricultural Research Centre (NARC), more than 200 employees took part in the action.

The strike is in response to the Kenyan government's plans to centralise all agricultural research institutes under the Ministry of Agriculture, without harmonising their pay. The workers at NARC and elsewhere are demanding the same conditions of service as those enjoyed by employees at other research centres under the institute.

Workers at Kari rejected management's pleas to return to work, insisting they would only do so after the institute's director, Romano Kiome, had addressed their complaints. They said the complaints had been pending for the last three years.

The strikers complained of disparities between house allowances paid to employees at the various centres. They also demanded that management harmonise the pension schemes, salary increases and the criteria for

promotions. They complained about inadequate medical cover and said that junior workers were excluded from the pension scheme, unlike their colleagues in other centres.

One striker told the *Nation*, “We have been complaining about these issues for the last three years. In January, the director promised to address them but nothing was done. We now want him to explain his stand before we resume duty.”

#### **South African chemical workers strike over wages and safety**

More than one thousand workers at Sasol Coal’s Secunda plant in Mpumalanga took strike action on September 7 in protest against Sasol’s 6.5-percent salary increase offer. Members of the trade union, Solidarity, are demanding an increase of 10 percent. They also want better safety conditions at the plant.

Dirk Hermann, the union spokesperson, told the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) that the employees were tired of “Sasol’s management style, which toys with the lives of workers”. He said that workers were unhappy about poor salary increases and unsafe working conditions. “The safety of workers has become a priority issue with our members. The cycle of fatal accidents at Sasol has to be broken. The recent operational accidents have to do with poor management strategies that put cost cutting above safety.”

On September 1, a gas explosion at Sasol’s Ethylene plant in Secunda killed seven workers and 100 others were injured. Five died instantly, one on arrival at hospital, and a seventh on the day before the strike began. Ben Otto, the manager of Highveld Mediclinic in Trichardt, told the SABC that four people are still in a critical condition.

A spokesman for the environmental NGO, Ground Work, Ferrial Adam, insisted that Sasol has a poor record with regard to worker safety. He said there should be an inquiry at presidential level. The NGO is also calling for a presidential Commission of Enquiry into the whole of South Africa’s chemical and oil refinery industry.

Solidarity is demanding that the unions are involved in the internal investigation into the causes of the explosion.

#### **South African public sector unions decide to strike**

South African public sector unions representing 700,000 public service employees have announced their decision to strike following their rejection of government’s six percent wage increase offer.

Speaking in Centurion, Fikile Majola, the labour caucus chairperson said, “A strike committee has been established and the first strike will take place on September 16.” He added that there was no way the unions could accept government’s so-called “last offer” and they were annoyed by the state’s aggressive stance.

According to Anton Louwrens, the general manager of the Public Servants Association, what had upset the unions most was the government’s announcement that an agency fee paid to unions by non-members would be cut off if the unions failed to accept the state’s offer. Louwrens told the SABC, “That money could equate to R10 million a year for a big union.”

All members of the eight unions would be called out, except essential nursing staff and policemen.

#### **Nigerian medical centre workers take indefinite strike action**

Workers at of the Federal Medical Centre, Yenagoa, are taking all-out indefinite strike action in protest over non-payment of their outstanding 12.5 percent salary increase arrears, as well as what they described as the “insensitivity of the Centre’s management to their plight”.

The strike involves members of the Medical and Health Workers Union of Nigeria, the Association of Medical Laboratory Scientists of Nigeria and the National Association of Nigeria Nurses and Midwives.

On September 7, *Vanguard* (Lagos) reported that in the early hours of the previous day the strikers barricaded the entrance to the only federal referral institution in the state. They carried placards, some of which read: “We are tired of MD’s lies, fabrications, intrigues, prevarications and

subversion of due process in public service”; “Extortion of pension tax from purported contract workers”; and Non implementation of mandatory yearly increment (stepping) since January, 2004”.

The three striking unions issued a statement alleging the non-payment of 20 months arrears, even though the money has been released by the federal government. The Medical Director had insisted that the money be used in paying doctors.

Strikers accused the Centre’s medical director, Dr Kobina Imananaghan of deducting 61.83 per cent of their July salaries instead of the 7.5 percent pension deductions prescribed by the government, leaving them with no means to provide for their families.

#### **Zambian university lecturers take strike action**

University of Zambia (UNZA) lecturers began an indefinite strike on September 6. According to the *Times* of Zambia, among other things the strikers are demanding that UNZA vice-chancellor Robert Serpell and his deputy Geoffrey Lungwangwa be restrained from performing normal duties, to allow for investigations into allegations of mismanagement of funds.

This is the second strike since the university opened last month. Evans Lampi,

general secretary of UNZA Lecturers and Researchers Union (UNZALARU) claimed that the university council had threatened to dismiss lecturers for allegedly violating an agreement that all matters should be resolved through dialogue.

He insisted that management was to blame for the crisis and accused it of not being concerned with the plight of students.

#### **Striking Botswana miners barred from resuming work**

Debswana management has carried out its threat to sack all the miners who returned to work on September 5, after a two-week strike. The dispute was over wages and cost of living increases, bonuses and housing allowances.

The return-to-work followed a decision on September 3 by the Botswana Mining Workers Union to abandon the strike action and return to negotiations. The strikers had agreed that all employees should go back to work. But when they reported for duty on September 5 they were referred to the administration, where they were asked to fill in clearance forms—a sign that their dismissals stand.

A spokesman for Debswana said that the miners had, by their involvement in the illegal strike, breached their contracts of employment. The company also wants union officials jailed for contempt of court. An Industrial Court ruling was made on August 6 declaring the strike illegal.



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