Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Shipbuilders in Spain strike in privatisation protest

On September 14, seven striking shipbuilders in Cadiz, southern Spain were injured in a tear gas and plastic bullet attack by riot police. Shipbuilders throughout Spain are striking to oppose the privatisation of the shipbuilding company Izar.

Workers are also opposing the proposed rescue plan of the crisis-ridden company, as they fear this could lead to job losses. They erected barricades in Cadiz on the previous day and also held protests on Thursday and Friday last week.

Francisco Fernandez Lucas, the chairman of the works council at the San Fernando dockyard just outside Cadiz, said, “The government should say whether it has an industrial plan” and the Socialist government should “stop making promises which are then not respected.”

On September 12, Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero said the government was preparing an “industrial viability plan” for Izar and that “no worker will be abandoned to his fate”.

Izar employs 10,700 workers in Spain and in May European Union authorities demanded that it repay 300 million euros ($362 million) of EU aid which Brussels regards as breaching competition rules. The European Commission may also demand that Izar reimburse more than 600 million euros of additional aid.

Workers at Eiffel Tower strike

On September 15, workers employed at the Eiffel Tower in Paris held strike action in a dispute over their contract. Staff at the tower walked off the job to demand a meeting with Jean-Bernard Bros, the head of the private company which employs them. The employees are concerned about the future of their jobs when the company’s contract to run the Eiffel Tower comes to an end next year.

The agreement between SNTE (Societe nouvelle d’exploitation de la Tour Eiffel), the company which runs the tower, and the city of Paris, which owns the property and the structure, is set to expire in 2005.

The industrial action began on September 14 when one employee received a warning over his job and fellow employees walked out in support. Bros said he would meet employees on condition they first resumed work. SNTE employs 250 people, and another 250 work in the monument’s gift shops and restaurants. The tower attracts six million visitors each year.

Boddingtons brewery workers in England end unofficial strike

Workers at Manchester’s Boddingtons brewery in northwest England ended their unofficial strike on September 15. The 24-hour strike began following a breakdown in negotiations between the Transport and General Workers Union leaders and brewery owners Interbrew. TGWU regional official Franny Joyce said, “Although what has happened may not be legal it doesn’t necessarily mean it isn’t right. The villains in this piece are not the workforce—it is the company chasing ever increasing profits.”

The talks followed a decision last week by the company to shut the brewery located in the Strangeways district of the city. The brewery is to close in 2005 with the loss of 55 jobs.

Interbrew plans to brew cask ale in Manchester switching its production to Hyde Brewery, Moss Side. Most of the production at Strangeways is set to move to Lancashire, Scotland and Wales.

Trade unions at Alitalia agree massive job losses, pay cuts and longer hours

Trade unions and management at the near-bankrupt Italian state airline, Alitalia, agreed on a new contract for pilots this week. The deal will result in some 2,500 job losses, cut pilots pay and nearly double their flying hours.

The company is at present losing $60,000 an hour and the deal with the trade unions was presented as a “survival” issue for the company. Alitalia was set to run out of money at the end of this month and the government stipulated that a 400 million euro emergency bridging loan was conditional on the cuts being implemented. Alitalia is 62 percent owned by the Italian government. The loan has also been approved by the European Union.

On September 16, it was announced that ground staff and pilots had agreed to the September 15 deadline set by the airline’s chief executive Giancarlo Cimoli for an acceptance of the deal. Cimoli had said that he was set to put the company into administration if the agreement was not accepted. Cabin crews have yet to agree to the deal.

The deal means that pilots will nearly double the 450 hours they currently fly each year, as well as taking a pay cut, a block on inflation-linked salary benefits, a two-year waiver of company payments to a social security fund and new rules on days off. The cuts are set to save the company 52 million euros in 2006.

Histadrut threatens general strike in Israel

The Histadrut (General Federation of Labour) in Israel is threatening a general strike to start on September 19 over unpaid wages to local authority workers. The strike is in protest against cuts envisioned in the 2005 budget to some 700,000 local and national government workers and a worsening of their pension conditions. No progress has been reported in talks between the Histadrut and the Finance Ministry.

National Union of Clerical, Administrative and Public Service Employees Chairman Leon Morozovsky notified Ministry of Finance director of wages Yuval Rachlevsky on September 14 that he intended to seek approval for a general strike. Morozovsky asked Histadrut chairman and member of the Knesset (parliament) Amir Perez (One Nation) and Histadrut Trade Union division head Shlomo Shani to authorise a strike in solidarity with the employees of the local authorities, who have not been paid their wages for several months.

The Ministry of Finance has proposed a seven percent cut in local authority workers’ pay, without making any commitment to provide money to pay their overdue salaries.

Histadrut legal advisor Dorit Tenne Perchik told *Globes*, “The states’ demands and offers are disgraceful, arrogant, and unacceptable. The Ministry of Finance is demanding further cuts, but is unwilling to pay wages and compensation for unpaid wages, which are the legal rights of every worker.”

Peretz pledged the labour federation would make “every effort to see that the strike was friendly." Histadrut officials said they were considering the possibility that tax clerks would report for work as usual and serve the public, but would not transfer money collected to government coffers. But unions warned that if sanctions persisted for more than a few days, they would gradually become an all-out stoppage of services. Union officials advised people needing passports, drivers-licenses or other documents to get them before the strike starts. Municipal workers are also expected to strike, halting garbage collection and the issuing of parking tickets.

Israeli firefighters begin strike over unpaid wages

Firefighters in northern Israel who have not received wages since May launched a strike on September 13 by closing down the South Ramat Hagolan fire station.

According to firefighters union chief Ronny Schmilovitz, another five stations in the Galil and Ramat Hagolan district will join the strike each day so that by the end of the holiday weekend there will be no firefighting services in the entire Golan, Safed and Kiryat Shmona region.

Schmilovitz said, "We have had it with promises. We agreed to pay cuts and reduced overtime hours. We want to make a dignified living and celebrate the Rosh Hashanah holiday."

Many firefighters have also not been paid benefits in the past eight months.

Bangladeshi workers deported from Namibia

The Namibian government is expelling around 400 Bangladeshi textile workers after they protested against their intolerable living conditions and poor pay. The workers were employed by the giant Malaysian textile manufacturer Ramatex, at a factory near Windhoek. The plant has a workforce of 8,000, of whom 1892 are Filipino and other Asian workers, and produces sportswear for companies like Nike, Puma, Otto Versand, Wal-Mart and Sears. Through its subsidiaries it also supplies goods for the fashion icons Dior and Ralph Lauren.

The Bangladeshi workers, who arrived in Namibia last month, told the BBC that they had been promised accommodation, food and a monthly salary of $US120. But when they arrived at the factory they were forced to live in appalling conditions, sharing a single toilet with only outside taps for washing. They also said that $US45 of their monthly pay had been docked for food.

On September 11, police informed the workers that their work permits had been withdrawn. They were told this was because two managers of Eastern Overseas Corporation, a recruitment agency based in Dhaka, Bangladesh, had been assaulted after they visited workers' homes to view their conditions. Forty of the workers were deported that same day and the rest were taken two days later.

One worker, Hossein Zakkir, told the Agence France-Presse that they had paid $3,500 dollars each to the recruitment agency. "To raise that money, most of us had to sell our houses, land and livestock and take out loans. As a result many are indebted today."

The National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) has accused the government of deliberately turning a blind eye to gross violation of labour laws by Ramatex. Last month the union carried out an investigation into conditions at the Ramatex factory, following an exposure by the *Namibian* (Windhoek) of the plight of the Bangladeshi workers. A spokesperson for the union said, "It is indeed tragic that 14 years after independence, workers in Namibia are deprived of basic human rights while the Ramatex company continues to operate as if it is above the law."

On September 13 the *Namibian* reported that the union was preparing to launch an international protest campaign against the Ramatex-Berhad group for its continuous violation of workers' rights.

The union told the paper that it suspected high-level corruption in the granting of work permits to the foreigners. Beating a nationalist drum, the union also questioned why the company was being permitted to employ so many foreign unskilled workers, when the work could be done by Namibians. The NUNW has demanded that the offices of the Ombudsman, the Prosecutor General and the Labour Commissioner investigate the influx of foreigners at the factory.

Kenyan railway workers strike over pay arrears

On September 13 more than 300 Kenyan railway workers took strike action, bringing rail traffic between Kenya and Uganda to a halt. The strikers are employees of the Kenya Railways Corporation (KRC), and are demanding payment of two months' salaries arrears.

Workers at the central workshop in Nairobi, where repairs and engineering works are carried out, staged a sit-in, while the workers in Eldoret, in the west of Kenya, went on strike. According to the *Nation* (Nairobi), a crane dispatched from Nakuru, to lift derailed wagons, was abandoned at Eldoret Railway Station.

Casual labourers were sent to an accident scene to repair the tracks, having been warned they would be sacked if they refused to do so. The casuals were also owed three months' wages.

The Eldoret branch chairman of the Kenya Railways Workers Union (KRWU) said the workers' children could not go to school because of their inability to pay school fees. He also revealed that the water supply to the workers' quarters had been disconnected, despite money being deducted from the workers' salaries to pay for the bills.

Jackton Asango, a casual laborer, told the *Nation* that he had worked continuously for KRC for the last eight years, but was still being kept on six-month contracts.

KRWU Secretary General Richard Kanani said the company's casual labourers had not been paid since June. He accused the management of ignoring the suffering of the workers, who have to struggle to make ends meet.

Zimbabwean farm labourers strike against wage cuts

Workers at a horticultural farm at Kondozi in the province of Manicaland, Zimbabwe, have gone on strike against low wages. The farm, previously privately owned, was taken over by a government parastatal earlier this year.

According to an IRIN report the property was seized in April by armed men acting on behalf of the Agricultural Rural Development Authority (ARDA). This was in spite of the fact that the farm should not have been liable for compulsory acquisition because it had been designated an Export Processing Zone (EPZ) and was earning hard currency.

Following the requisition, the ARDA slashed the workforce from 5,000 to approximately 150. Around 1,500 workers living on the farm were displaced and more than 3,000 from outlying areas were sacked.

Those still employed on the farm were reclassified as basic labourers and effectively their wages were cut by 50 percent.

General and Allied Plantation Workers Union (GAPWUZ) official, Gift Muti, commented, "They were initially agro-based workers receiving about $Z130,000 ($US23) per month because they are involved in processing, but ARDA turned them into general agricultural workers and is paying them $Z72,800 ($US13)—that's why they had to engage in this industrial action."

According to a report by Refugees International released last month, the government's "land reform" programme, which began in the year 2,000, has created a population of over 150,000 former farm workers who now have no jobs or homes.

The report said, "The government of Zimbabwe refuses to acknowledge that their implementation of the land redistribution programme has caused forced displacement. To further compound the issue, governmental authorities have increasingly restricted access to farming areas by humanitarian agencies and independent analysts, making it difficult for the displaced and other vulnerable groups to access humanitarian assistance."