

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

24 September 2004

## Workers demonstrate against budget cuts in the Netherlands

On September 20 more than 70,000 workers demonstrated in Holland against spending cuts proposed in the 2005 budget of the right-wing government of Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende. Protests were held in various towns and cities, including The Hague, the seat of government, where an estimated 2,500 people rallied outside parliament. Industrial action by public transport workers brought The Hague to a standstill.

An estimated 60,000 people protested in Rotterdam as public transport staff, port workers and teachers struck. Rotterdam is the location of the country's largest port, and thousands of dockworkers held a 24-hour strike in the container terminal. A further 2,000 people demonstrated in Utrecht, 3,000 in Eindhoven and 3,500 in Arnhem. On September 22, hundreds of public servants also demonstrated in Amsterdam.

The government has introduced a raft of cuts in social spending and said that "excessive high wage increases" had left the national budget in "arrears" compared with other European competitors. Some of the areas suffering cuts are early retirement schemes, social security, including the WW unemployment benefits, and the WAO worker disability pension and healthcare.

Last year the Dutch economy shrank by 0.9 percent and is only expected to grow by 1.25 percent this year and 1.5 percent in 2005. The cuts are forecast to reduce the budget deficit from 3 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to 2.6 percent next year—saving 2.5 billion euros.

Trade unions have announced that another national demonstration will be held in Amsterdam on October 2. It is estimated that 100,000 people will take part.

## French postal staff strike

On September 21, French postal workers employed by the state owned La Poste held strike action to protest government plans to close nearly half of the country's 14,000 post offices and impose massive job losses. The three unions involved in the strike said 15 to 20 percent of postal workers participated. Postal staff also held a demonstration outside the Paris headquarters of La Poste.

The Chirac government plans to close the post offices in an attempt to remain competitive with counterparts in other European countries. Unions claim that the closures will result in 6,000 post offices being closed by 2007, with 10,000 job

losses.

The privatising or part privatisation of post offices has been implemented in several European countries, such as Britain and France, while the Netherlands and Germany have already opened up their services to private investment.

## Ground staff and refueling workers at London airports set to strike

Key workers at Heathrow and Gatwick airports are set to strike for 24 hours on Saturday September 26 and the following Thursday. The workers, who are involved in two separate disputes, are members of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU).

At Gatwick airport the strike involves some 600 ground staff at Servisair, the second largest ground handler at the airport. A total of 287 baggage and cargo handlers, loaders and maintenance staff voted to take action over "increased work pressure". Servisair is used by a number of airlines at Gatwick, including Easy Jet, Ryanair and Emirates.

The strike arose when the TGWU accused Servisair of victimising and suspending a senior steward for "charges which have never been properly explained". The TGWU alleges that full disciplinary action had not taken place, as the steward was off sick with an injury.

The industrial action at Heathrow Airport involves refueling workers who are set to strike on September 24 and 25. The industrial action only involves 40 workers, but they service 40 percent of all flights from Britain's busiest airport. The strike will affect the flights of 40 airlines, including British Airways, Qantas, Virgin Atlantic and American Airlines.

The dispute is over the refueling company AFS cutting basic pay, stopping final salary pensions and downgrading overtime pay rates. The TGWU said that a third of the workforce have seen cuts in pay and benefits of £9,500.

The refuellers have a dangerous job that involves driving 60-tonne oil tankers with huge quantities of flammable aviation fuel. The TGWU is calling for a basic pay rise from £22,515 to at least £25,000.

## South African food workers shot by security personnel

Two striking workers were shot by security personnel outside the Fruit Salad Health plant in City Deep, Johannesburg, on September 20. The workers, who were picketing the factory, were hit by rubber bullets and were later hospitalised.

Fruit Salad Health produces for Woolworths and the British-based supermarket chain Tesco. According to the *Star*

newspaper, most of the staff earn about R480 a month and those employed for less than a year receive only R6 (\$0.93) an hour with up to 80 hours guaranteed work a month. An “incentive” of 30c (less than 5 US cents) is currently paid for every 200 kg of finished goods over the 4,000 kg they are expected to produce every shift.

One employee, Tshepo Mmeko, told the paper that he had been at the factory for two years and worked an eleven and a half hour shift for R7.61 (\$1.17) an hour. If he was lucky he made R1,000 (\$154.56) a month, out of which he paid R100 (\$15.46) a week on transport. He complained that they were expected to work in cold storage rooms without protective clothing and that they had not been given an increase for three years. “Management said they can’t increase our pay because they are not making money, but we know they are,” he said.

The Food and Allied Workers Union brought the union’s dispute before the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). After management refused to appear to put its case, the CCMA declared that the strike was legal.

#### **Botswana diamond miners still barred from resuming work**

Three hundred and eighteen Botswana diamond miners sacked by Debswana when they attempted to return to work on September 5 after a two-week strike have not been reinstated. The action was over cost of living increases and housing allowances. It involved almost half of Debswana’s workforce of 5,600 and was the longest in the company’s history. The Botswana Miners Union general secretary told *Business Report* that the strike was called off on the advice of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions in Brussels.

The sacked miners were all essential staff, whom the company says have been replaced. Originally 451 were dismissed, of whom over a hundred have since been re-employed. The rest are awaiting the result of a Court of Appeal hearing on September 24. The union hopes the hearing will overturn an Industrial Court decision that the strike was illegal.

Following the Industrial Court’s original ruling, Debswana filed charges of contempt against union officials and is seeking orders for their committal. These charges are on hold, pending the result of the Appeal Court hearing.

Debswana operates four diamond mines and is jointly owned by De Beers and the Botswana government.

#### **Union official condemns Zambian judiciary workers’ strike**

Last week, judiciary workers in the Zambian Copper Belt took strike action over the non-payment of housing allowances. On September 17, Elphas Munakaila, Longacres branch chairman of the Civil Servants and Allied Workers’ Union of Zambia, denounced the action as illegal.

This attack was endorsed by the Registrar of the High Court, Lamont Funkuta, who appealed to strikers to return to work. He told the *Times of Zambia* that the strikers should listen to their union leaders and that those who insisted on the strike risked

being disciplined.

#### **Zambian nurses begin sit-in strike**

On September 20, nurses in the Eastern Region of Zambia began a sit-down strike in support of their demand for a minimum of 170 hours per month Additional Duty Hour Allowance (ADHA) across the board for all nursing staff.

At Koforidua Regional Hospital nurses left the wards and gathered in one of the hospital’s conference rooms. One of the nurses told the Ghana News Agency that the strike was part of a national action being taken by nurses to back their demand for equity in sharing the ADHA.

She explained that nurses at the Koforidua Regional Hospital received an average of 67-hour ADHA per month while nurses in other health facilities in the same region received less. In the Greater Accra and Ashanti regions, however, nurses doing the same work were claiming between 120 and 150 hours. She said, “All efforts to get the issue resolved have not been heeded to by the Ministry of Health,” adding that the strike would continue until the ministry instituted measures to achieve ADHA equity among nurses across the country.

Nurses at the Nkawkaw Holy Family Hospital gave notice that their sit-down action would begin on September 21.

#### **Zimbabwean municipal nurses strike**

Nurses at the Municipal Clinics in Chitungwiza, near Harare, have taken strike action in protest against low salaries and poor working conditions. The striking nurses complain that the wards are without the most basic medical necessities, such as oxygen gas, cotton wool and sanitary pads.

One nurse told the *Herald* (Harare): “There is no money here, my dear, and we cannot work on empty stomachs. To make matters worse, we do not have equipment to use. Do you see that pillowcase over there? We use it as a delivery pack.”



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