

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

2 October 2004

Spanish shipyard workers continue protests against privatisation

On September 27, tens of thousands of Spanish shipyard workers demonstrated at the northwestern port of Ferrol to demand that action be taken to save shipyards threatened with bankruptcy. The protest is the latest in a series that have sometimes seen violent clashes between workers and riot police. In the city of Cadiz, workers have previously set barricades alight and fought riot police in protest at plans by SEPI, the Spanish government industrial holding company that owns the docks, to split military and civilian-use yards and inject private cash.

Trade union officials said that up to 45,000 shipyard workers and their supporters participated in the demonstration. Shipyard workers throughout Spain employed by the public sector shipbuilder Izar are fearful of losing their jobs. Izar plans to introduce private finance into the yards and cut jobs among the workforce of 10,700.

The European Union is demanding that Izar repay 300 million euros (\$368.9 million) in aid, which the organisation says breached EU competition rules.

The Socialist Party Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, elected in March, is on record that the yards will not close and jobs will not be lost. Despite this, the Socialist Party has said that it supports the restructuring plan.

The shipbuilding industry in Spain is facing increased competition from yards throughout Asia. Since the 1980s, the industry has seen the loss of 30,000 jobs under the restructuring plans of successive governments.

Dutch transport strike brings Amsterdam region to a standstill

Transport workers in north Holland took industrial action on September 27 that grounded trams, buses, subways and ferries in Amsterdam and surrounding areas. No public transport was available in Amsterdam, a city covering some 220 square kilometres that has 66 bus lines, 16 tram lines, four subway lines and four ferry routes serving 160,000 fares each day.

The strike was called by the FNV Bondgenoten trade union in opposition to plans by the government to increase the working week to 40 hours from 36 hours. The stoppage also included workers employed at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport.

Swedish transport workers set to strike

This week, the Swedish transport workers union announced that up to 2,500 of its members are to strike on October 11 in a dispute over proposed changes in salaries and working hours at the travel conglomerate SAS AB, which operates Scandinavian Airlines.

The strike is over the working hours and pay of ground staff, including mechanics, technicians, ramp workers and baggage handlers. The action will affect other airlines that schedule flights in and out of Sweden.

Other transport workers in the union employed at seaports are to hold a sympathy strike starting in November. Mainly affected will be Goteborg in southwestern Sweden, as well as ports in and around the

capital, Stockholm.

Scandinavian Airlines has been hit by falling demand for business travel, as well as competition by other airlines, including budget carriers like Ryanair. Last year, the company began a restructuring deal with the trade union in a bid to cut costs by up to 14 billion kronor (\$1.8 billion). As part of this agreement, the trade unions sanctioned a deal to freeze or lower the wages of union members.

The SAS Group also includes regional airlines Spanair, Braathens, Wideroe and Air Botnia, as well as budget carrier Snowflake and the Rezidor SAS hotel chain.

Air traffic controllers in Norway hold industrial action

Air traffic controllers in Norway struck on September 28 in an action that left 40,000 passengers stranded and air travel over the southern half of the country paralysed.

The workers are in dispute over job reorganisation plans with the Norwegian civil aviation authority, Avinor. All flights to and from Oslo's international airport Gardermoen were cancelled starting at around 11:00 a.m. (0900 GMT) when the airspace over southern Norway was closed. The air controllers at the central air control centre in Roeyken near Oslo all called in sick. It is illegal for air traffic controllers to strike. The action also affected six other airports in southern Norway, with a total of 600 flights grounded.

The dispute began immediately after Avinor announced plans to shut down the Roeyken air control centre by 2008. It said that it would then concentrate all operations in southern Norway at the Sola centre near Stavanger in southwestern Norway. This is a long distance from Oslo.

Refuse workers in Cumbria, North England, strike

On September 29, refuse workers and street cleaners in Cumbria began the first of three one-day strikes in an ongoing pay dispute. The action will affect many parts of Allerdale including Workington and Bassenthwaite.

The members of the Transport & General Workers Union, employed by private company FOCSA, claim that a two-tier pay system means many workers are getting different salaries for doing the same job. Some of the staff, if they previously worked for Allerdale Council before being taken on by FOCSA six years ago, are paid less per hour—sometimes by as much as £2.

Additional 24-hour strikes are set for October 4 and October 8.

Refuse workers in Coventry, England, hold unofficial strike

On September 23, refuse workers in Coventry in the West Midlands ended a 48-hour unofficial strike. The workers took the action after being informed that their wages could be cut by up to £4,500 a year.

More than 100 refuse collectors at the London Road depot in the Whitley district participated in the strike, which resulted in rubbish being uncollected at 60,000 homes across the city. The cuts by Coventry City Council would result in 2,000 council employees having their jobs re-graded to a lower salary level. The new scheme is set to be implemented for its 10,000 staff in January 2005.

The action ended following a two-hour meeting with representatives of the refuse workers, when the council agreed to hold further talks with trade unions over the content and impact of the new scheme. A ballot on the council's proposals for employees who are trade union members is set to take place during October.

Eurostar engineers and maintenance workers vote to strike

On September 29, Eurostar cross-channel train engineers and maintenance workers in the UK voted to strike in a dispute of pay, travel concessions and working arrangements. The members of the Rail Maritime and Transport Union voted 176 to 27 in favour of industrial action.

Other Eurostar customer support staff are involved in an ongoing dispute with the company over pay differentials, and the union announced that they are also to be called out on strike. The union said it would also seek the support of unions in France and Belgium. No date has been set for the strike.

Strike at Nigerian psychiatric hospital enters sixth week

Doctors at Yaba Psychiatric Hospital, in Lagos, Nigeria, have been on strike for five weeks over non-payment of salary arrears. Nurses and midwives at the hospital joined in the strike on September 8.

According to the *Daily Champion* (Lagos), the only patients remaining in the hospital are those without families. All the rest have been evacuated by their relatives.

The strikers are demanding salary arrears for May and August 2004. In May nurses received only 75 percent of their pay, and in August just 65 percent. The doctors are also supporting the nurses' demand for the employment of more staff to ease the workload and for the improvement of working conditions.

The spokesperson for the Nurses and Midwives Association hospital branch, Martha Raro-Edo, said that the union had given management a one-week ultimatum before the strike began.

Rufus Awharitoma, secretary of the association, said that the strike was inevitable, considering the poor working condition, adding that the "issue of payment of salary was first raised in May... Instead of checking the problem then, the medical director simply rebuffed us."

The association had consulted the Federal Ministry of Health on the arbitrary tax issue and clarified the situation, "but on meeting the management they ignored us." He added, "This is a strong indication that they are up to something. We have been overtaxed for a long time. We are even asking for a rebate which they have persistently refused to grant us."

The nurses are also claiming unpaid teaching allowances of about N46,000 (US\$350) each for teaching students at other hospitals in Lagos.

Resident doctors at the University of Benin Teaching Hospital (UBTH) are also taking strike action in protest against compulsory deductions from their monthly salaries.

In a recent report by the World Health Organisation (WHO), oil-rich Nigeria was ranked 157th out of 191 countries in terms of the available health and medical facilities.

Zimbabwean junior doctors strike

Junior doctors employed by the Zimbabwe Public Service Commission (PSC) have been on strike since September 23 to demand full payment of their September salaries. So far, they have only received half pay.

President of the Hospital Doctors' Association (HDA) Phibion Manyanga said not a single doctor in towns such as Bulawayo and Mutare had received the remaining half of their salaries. Patients were being turned away from Parirenyatwa Hospital because there were not

enough doctors to treat them. The few senior doctors remaining at the hospital were treating patients who were critically ill.

South African platinum industry halted by two major strikes

A strike involving 17,000 employees at Impala Platinum's mining and processing plant, 80 miles north of Johannesburg, began on September 30.

The dispute is over the terms of a two-year wage deal agreed on last year between Impala and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The agreement offered workers a 9.5 percent increase for the first year and an inflation plus 1.5 percent for the second. It included a clause allowing either party to renegotiate if the actual increase was less than 7.5 percent or more than 9 percent. The present dispute is about what should be the trigger point for renegotiation. According to Reuters, Impala wants it to be 7.5 percent and the NUM insists it should be 8.5 percent.

Production at the plant has come to a complete standstill. A spokesman for Impala, which produces one third of the world's platinum, said that the strike would cost the company 28 million rand (US\$4.3 million) a day.

Four months ago, 1,700 rockdrill operators were sacked by Impala for taking part in what the company claimed was an unofficial strike. They were reinstated after the settlement of the dispute.

On September 30, another strike began at AngloPlat, following a go-slow at a number of the company's mines. The dispute involves Solidarity, the NUM, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, the Commercial Workers Union of South Africa, the Mouthpiece Workers Union, and Togetherness Amalgamated Workers Union of South Africa.

The action is in support of a demand for a 9 percent wage increase. Management has offered 7.5 percent. The unions are also demanding that workers who perform the same jobs should receive the same pay. The present pay differentials date back to before 1994.



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