

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

29 October 2004

## Europe

### **Greek civil servants and air traffic controller's strike**

On October 21, Greek civil servants held a nationwide industrial action. The workers are demanding the introduction of a minimum salary of 1,100 euros for all branches of public service and the allocation of permanent jobs for thousands of temporary contract workers.

The action resulted in the closure of most public services, including schools, local government services and tax offices. State-run hospitals operated with emergency staff. During the day major roads in central Athens were blocked for several hours as striking workers attended a protest rally. Overall, however, public transport was largely not affected by the strike.

Greek traffic controllers also participated in the strike affecting many domestic and international flights to Greece. The national carrier Olympic Airways cancelled 23 domestic flights and rescheduled 17 other domestic and international services.

### **STIB transport workers hold industrial action in Belgium**

Transport staff in Belgium employed by the public transport company, STIB held a 24-hour strike on October 21.

The strikes were called to protest over workers conditions, including issues regarding training, sackings, and the subjective interpretation of agreements. Staff also complain that tight schedules mean they miss out on their breaks when traffic is heavy.

The company dismissed the reasons for the industrial action with Alain Flausch, STIB director general commenting sarcastically, "This seems to me like a strike against traffic jams. We understand the difficulties faced by drivers and we can do our part to improve this situation. However, we regret that they have chosen to strike and take passengers hostage this way."

Flausch conceded that the company was short of around about 65 drivers, which contributed to the problems.

### **Belgium hospital and rest home workers strike**

On October 21, hospital staff in Belgium walked off the job to demand higher pay and better working conditions. A number of grievances have been cited by the workforce as the cause of the dispute, including that some health sector workers have not received salary increases in about eight years.

The industrial action saw employees strike at hospitals and rest homes across the country. In Wallonia employees at around 25 rest homes stopped work. In the city of Brussels industrial action was held at the Edith Cavell hospital for the first time. In another protest, 25 protesters from the non-merchant sector of the Flemish LBC union demonstrated at the home of Yves Leterme, the minister-president for the Flemish region to voice their concerns.

### **Funeral workers in England strike for better pay**

On October 25, hundreds of funeral workers across England held strike action for 24-hours in a dispute over pay and long hours. Employed by Co-operative Funeralcare, the workers include embalmers, funeral directors and crematorium staff. They are also engaged in an ongoing overtime ban following their rejection of a 3.5 percent pay offer from their employers.

Most of the workers are member of the Transport and General Workers' Union who said this week that funeral workers were among the lowest paid in the country, with salaries from £12,500 a year.

A union spokesman said that the Co-operative Group made more than £300 million in profit in the last year, and that "there is money there" to pay workers a salary increase.

### **Brewery workers in Manchester, England set to strike**

Brewery workers employed at the Boddingtons brewery in Manchester, northwest England are to strike for 48 hours on November 1 as part of a campaign to prevent the closure of the site. Boddingtons's ales have been brewed in Manchester for over 200 years. Boddingtons's owners, Interbrew have stated that it is no longer profitable to produce beer at the site and that production will be moved elsewhere, with the loss of 55 jobs.

The firm plans to shut the plant in 2005 with production moving to sites in Lancashire, Scotland and Magor in South Wales.

## **Africa**

### **Nigerian repression of trade unionists**

Many Nigerian union members have been subjected to arrest, and some are still imprisoned for taking part in the strike against fuel price increases called by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC). At least two people were killed in the government clampdown surrounding the strike.

The African Trade Unions Centre has petitioned Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo to stop the use of physical harassment and intimidation against union members in Nigeria. The body said that the actions of the federal government violated the conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on trade union rights.

African unions belonging to the International Congress of Free Trade Unions African Regional Organisation (ICFTU-AFRO) have also demanded an independent inquiry to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of aviation expert and former unionist, Mr Jerry Agbeyegebe.

The General Secretary of ICFTU-AFRO, Andrew Kailembo said, "I am afraid what we see is nothing but state repression and we are coming to the conclusion that those days when law enforcement agencies acted with impunity are not far from over. The country appears to have the trappings of a democracy, but not the substance and content. Abuses of workers' rights continue to take place unchecked and what we see in the country smacks of nothing else but state repression."

The organisation expressed concern at the tendency of Obasanjo's leadership to intimidate people with opposing views, referring to the arrest and harassment of the NLC President Adams Oshiomhole, the murder of a 12-year-old boy by the Kaduna police and the arrest of many others.

The union appealed to the president to immediately release all the trade union members who are still under arrest, and to drop the charges against them.

The petition from the ICFTU-AFRO followed protests from the South African union federation, COSATU and the America Labour Centre, which accused the Nigerian government of anti-union practices, and dictatorial tendencies worse than the previous military governments.

### **Zimbabwean mine bosses seek authority to sack strikers**

Zimbabwean miners face the sack for taking part in a

week-long strike early October called by their union after pay talks with employers collapsed. The Chamber of Mines, representing the mine owners, has now applied to the Labour Court for permission to dismiss those employees who went on strike.

The body called for the Labour Court to order that they were "discharged from paying wages and benefits to all employees who participated in the unlawful collective job action for the duration of the collective job action." The chamber also asked the court to absolve it from the payment wages for the period of the strike.

The chamber wants to prevent the Associated Mine Workers Union of Zimbabwe from collecting workers' monthly dues. They are also seeking court permission to take legal action against the union.

Union president Tinago Edmund Ruzive told *Businessdigest* that they were shocked by the submissions made by the employers.

### **Zimbabwe telephone workers suspended**

Workers at TelOne, the Zimbabwe parastatal for landline telephones, have been suspended for taking strike action over the last two weeks. They had walked out in protest at the management's failure to pay them a salary increase recommended by an arbitrator in March.

The president of the workers' union, the Communication and Allied Services Workers' Union of Zimbabwe (CASWUZ), Mr Lovemore Matombo said that attempts to hold a dialogue with TelOne's management had been rejected and workers had been given written notice of suspension.

### **South African strikers sacked**

Seventy workers, dismissed by Cape Oil and Margarine for allegedly taking illegal strike action have applied to the South African Labour Court to get their jobs back. The dispute took place in May when workers walked out over fears of hundreds of job losses.

Cape Oil and Margarine, part of the Tiger Foods Brand, had claimed at the time that no jobs would be lost. General Workers Union general secretary Vukile Mgul said that about 1,000 jobs had already been lost as six Tiger Brands plants around South Africa had been closed down.



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