

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

5 November 2004

Europe

Volkswagen workers in Germany strike as union agrees concessions

On November 1, 15,000 autoworkers at Germany's Volkswagen walked off the job in the latest "warning strikes" in a dispute over wage negotiations. At VW's factory in Braunschweig in northern Germany, nearly 3,000 workers struck for four hours overnight. Workers also walked out at VW's plants in Kassel, central Germany, and the northern plants of Salzgitter, Emden and Wolfsburg.

Following the end of the "Friedenspflicht" wage negotiations deadline on October 28, 4,000 workers struck temporarily the next day.

The company was demanding a two-year wage freeze for the 103,000 staff at the company's six West German plants and a 30 percent reduction of 2 billion euros in labour costs by 2011. The IG Metall union originally called for a four percent rise and some job guarantees, but quickly scaled its demands back to a two percent increase.

A sixth round of wage talks began on November 1. Hartmut Meine, chief negotiator for IG Metall, said they would be decisive on whether an agreement could be reached. German President Horst Koehler called on both management at VW and the union to resolve the dispute quickly.

IG Metall Vice President Berthold Huber made it clear that the union did not support industrial action stating, "We don't want a strike. We want a solution at the negotiating table. Only when no acceptable agreement is reached here will the strike question arise."

On November 3, IG Metall announced that it had reached a settlement with the company and that the dispute was over. Waldemar Drosdzioik of IG Metall announced that "A compromise has been found. Both sides emerge as winners."

In reality the agreement includes only some job guarantees until 2011, with the union accepting a 28-month pay freeze on its members until the end of January 2007 in exchange for a one-off payment of 1,000 euros.

The German government hailed the deal, with the Economy Minister Wolfgang Clement stating, "It's... a very important signal for the international business world that we're able to solve our problems without labour disputes, unlike in many other countries."

Volkswagen announced a cut in profits for the first nine months of this year, with a 65 percent drop in third-quarter net profit from the same period a year ago. For the first nine months its operational profit before extraordinary items was down 20 percent over last year to 1.46 billion euros.

Tobacco workers in England strike in pay dispute

On October 29, workers employed at the British American Tobacco (BAT) factory in Southampton, southern England took strike action following their rejection of a pay offer.

The 400 staff are members of the Amicus trade union, which authorised the strike as part of a campaign for a three percent wage increase. Amicus rejected a 2.6 percent offer by the company and has called for industrial action every Wednesday until the dispute is settled.

John Allot, the national officer of Amicus, said, "BAT have announced massive profits while refusing to pay our members fairly."

Bank workers in Portugal strike in pension fund dispute

On October 29, employees at the Caixa Geral de Depósitos bank in Portugal struck to protect their pension fund rights. Some 95 percent of all workers at Caixa Geral de Depósitos went on strike. Workers at several unions participated in the industrial action as part of a campaign to prevent the incorporation of Caixa Geral de Depósitos Pension Fund into the Caixa Geral de Aposentações fund. The strike action closed down most branches of the Caixa Geral de Depósitos.

Strike at brewery in Manchester, England

Workers at the Boddingtons brewery in Manchester, England began a two-day strike on November 1 as part of a campaign to prevent the closure of the plant. The strike was called by and involves members of the Transport and General Workers. Interbrew, the company's owner, plans to close the brewery and move production elsewhere with the loss of 55 jobs. Beer has been brewed at the plant for more than 200 years.

Middle East

Israel Discount Bank workers shut down 70 branches

On October 29, Israel Discount Bank workers shut down 70 of the bank's 120 branches. The bank's union is threatening to step up the industrial action by closing down the remaining branches this week.

The Discount Bank workers committee declared November 1 that it would close down a different area of the bank's activities

each day, starting with direct banking services and its lucrative Ramat Gan Diamond Exchange branch, until management met its demands.

Management said it viewed with “gravity” the committee’s decision to disrupt bank activity.

Union chairman, Riki Bachar, said that the strike was over management plans to fire tenured employees. Bachar called the step a precedent, as the bank had previously employed voluntary early retirement programs rather than layoffs—and also contravenes the work agreement that only permits laying off temporary staff.

Staff have also demanded bonuses based on the bank’s first-half financial results, reported at the beginning of the month. Release of the report was delayed by strike action, but it included NIS 366 million in net profits for the first six months.

Another cause for the industrial unrest at the bank is its looming privatisation. The government recently issued a tender for the sale of its controlling stake in the bank, to which several parties submitted their intention to bid.

Talks between the staff and M.I. Holdings, which manages the privatisation issue, have broken down concerning the rights and work conditions due to the 5,200 workers after the sale. Whilst the workers have said they want to see the current collective work agreement be preserved for five years after the privatisation, M. I. Holdings favours only two-year preservation. In addition, the bank workers want to restrict the sale of Discount’s assets by the new owners for at least 10 years after the purchase. M. I. Holdings refuses to accept this demand.

First International Bank of Israel faces further unrest

Workers at the First International Bank of Israel (FIBI) are to continue their work dispute. FIBI branch managers and signatories are demanding a bonus equivalent to one-month’s salary, as at Bank Leumi. The FIBI workers committee said this lack of parity and management’s decision to appoint an “outsider” to serve as internal bank controller are the reasons for the work dispute.

Gaza municipal workers demand unpaid wages

Workers and employees in Gaza municipality entered a fifth day of strike action as of October 28. The workers’ demands include payment of their last month’s wages and establishment of a regulated system of regular payment.

Municipality workers are owed wages on various Palestinian Authority (PA) government and security institutions that total around one million dollars.

Africa

Teachers strike in Uganda

More than 3,000 primary school teachers in the Kabale district of Uganda began a strike on October 27, to demand an increase in their salaries.

The teachers decided to take action following a meeting with the acting district chief administrative officer and the municipal town clerk. The teachers complained that it was not possible to

continue teaching others, while their own children were forced to leave their places of learning because of their inability to pay the fees.

The teachers had written to the Ugandan president in October, reminding him of a pledge he had made to increase their salaries, and saying that they had already waited too long. They pointed out that they were the lowest paid professionals and suffered poor working conditions, while also being subjected to a heavy tax burden.

Textile workers strike in Kenya

More than 300 employees at Londra Limited, a textile firm in Kenya, went out on strike on October 28 to protest against working conditions. The workers said they were not allowed any lunch breaks and were locked in the factory premises during their whole working day. They accused management of refusing to allow them their entitlements to annual and sick leave, as required by the country’s labour laws.

The *East African Standard* quoted John Liomu, an employee of the firm, who said that any workers who go on sick leave were never paid their dues, and accused the management of firing those who took sick leave: “It is very inhuman for the management to serve its sick employees with dismissal letters, while still admitted in hospital.”

Nigerian Nurses protest and doctors strike

Nurses from the Federal Medical Centre marched to Government House in Abia State, Nigeria on October 28. They complained that their salaries had been cut and they had been locked out of their offices for two weeks.

Beatrice Ndiyo of the Nigerian Association of Nurses and Midwives told reporters that the hospital was in danger of total collapse. Her members lacked basic supplies like surgical gloves, syringes and even soap.

Meanwhile doctors at the Federal Medical Centre in Yenagoa have begun an indefinite strike over unpaid salaries.

Dispute over farmworkers’ housing in South Africa

Employees of Anglo American Farms fought with police after they were evicted from company houses on November 2. The company had obtained a court order to evict 90 residents from Lanquedoc, near Franschoek, South Africa.

The residents’ leader Gabriel Adams said, “We were struggling to get legal aid and we did not get a chance to defend our case.”



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