Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

6 May 2005

Europe

Strike halts Finnish paper industry

On April 27, tens of thousands of pulp and paper workers in Finland continued their ongoing campaign of strike action to protest the increased use of temporary employees, outsourcing and a weakening of their contracts. Workers are also disputing the failure of contract negotiations and the nonpayment of wages for staff that have previously been on strike.

The conflict escalated last week when management at the Anjalankoski factory of the paper manufacturer Stora Enso decided to keep the factory shut down and to stop payment of wages until April 29. Following this decision, protesting staff decided to remain on strike until that date. The strike then quickly spread to other Stora Enso factories.

National incomes conciliator Juhani Salonius, trade union leaders and employers' organisations met on April 26 to discuss the dispute, but were unable to strike any deal beyond agreeing that they would continue to meet. The talks broke down when workers resumed protest action and wildcat strikes.

The Finnish Paperworkers Union has been keen to distance itself from the wildcat action. The union chairman, Jouko Ahonen, said that the stoppages had been decided at the individual workplaces and by local union organisations, and that the national union was not involved in any way. Ahonen described the walkouts on April 27 as "demonstrations" rather than strikes.

The union has said, however, that a nationwide strike may be held on May 16-17.

The forest products industry has condemned the strikes as illegal and stated that they may force plants to order longer shutdowns to save costs. UPM, the world's largest maker of magazine paper, issued a second-quarter earnings profits warning, claiming that the strikes had cost it €5-€6 million (US$6-$8 million) a day in lost earnings.

Doctors in Germany strike against increased working hours and cuts in benefits

On May 2, nearly 5,000 doctors at hospitals across Germany held temporary strikes to protest against the prolongation of work-time and cuts to Christmas and holiday benefits. The majority of the Bundesländer administrations—the doctors' employers—have demanded that staff on new contracts work 42 hours a week. The main doctors' federation, Marburger Bund, insisted on a return to the previous 38.5-hour week and the maintenance of regulations of Christmas and holiday benefits. The federation also called for a new collective wage and working conditions agreement.

The federation denounced the fact that there are 5,000 doctors' jobs vacant in German hospitals because young doctors are increasingly leaving Germany and looking for work in other countries.

Belgian baggage handlers strike

On April 29, workers with the baggage-handling firm GlobeGround held strike action and protests amid concerns over the future of their jobs. The company employs 160 staff. The action resulted in flight delays at Zaventem airport outside of Brussels.

GlobeGround had been declared bankrupt the previous day; staff halted work as soon as they were informed. This stoppage resulted in flight delays at GlobeGround clients Lufthansa and Austrian Airlines. Workers blocked the luggage conveyer belt on Friday morning, causing delays to all of the two airlines' flights. In an attempt to break the strike, the airlines flew in baggage-handling personnel from abroad. These handlers were ordered to abandon their posts after GlobeGround workers filed a complaint with Belgian labour inspectors.

Textile staff in Belgium take industrial action

Textile workers in Belgium employed by the Domo multinational company began strike action May 2 to demand better pay and working conditions. Workers began a 24-hour strike that is set to expand to involve other employees at the company over the next week. Domo employs 36,000 worldwide.

Africa

Zambian nurses continue strike

Nurses at Ndola Central Hospital in Zambia have pledged to continue their strike, which began on April 25, until the government accedes to their demands. They told the *Post* (Lusaka) that the government was being unfair by giving housing allowances to teachers while withholding them from nurses. They said that they had a right to decent housing, and

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that denying them allowances was a violation of the labour laws.

Zambian council workers call off strike

Unions representing Zambian council workers called off a national strike on May 3. The dispute, which began on April 25, was in support of a demand for the government to release K35 billion (US$7.6 million) for local councils to fund packages for retirees and workers seconded to utility companies.

Zambia United Local Authorities Workers Union (ZULAWU) General Secretary Oast Choongo announced the end of the strike after the government agreed to its demands. The government is first releasing K10 billion (US$2.2 million) and has promised to release the balance of K25 billion (US$5.5 million) within two weeks.

Workers in some regions of the country ignored their unions' instructions to return to work on May 3. Choongo told the *Times of Zambia* that unionised workers in the entire Copperbelt, apart from Kitwe, as well as council workers in the Southern, Northern and Luapula provinces and the Masaiti District were still on strike on May 5.

Nigerian media workers strike over benefits

Journalists, television and radio workers, and other media workers began a three-day strike May 3 to demand the government honour its promises over monetisation benefits. The strikers belong to the Nigerian Union of Journalists, the Amalgamated Union of Public Corporation, Technical and Recreational Employees, and the Radio, Television, Theatre and Arts Workers Union of Nigeria (RATT-AWU).

The strike was previously suspended last month after the government promised to pay the benefits, but this was not fulfilled. On May 2, Salihu Abdulhamid Dembos, national president of RATT-AWU, speaking on behalf of all the unions, told a news conference that they would call on all workers in Nigerian state-owned radio and television stations to embark on a solidarity strike in support of their federal colleagues unless the government met their demands.

Dembos said that the original agreement on the monetisation policy went back to October 1, 2003, when the policy began in the core federal agencies. The unions' understanding was that a letter from President Olusegun Obasanjo to the head of service had included a directive that every employee of the civil service and parastatals (partially government-owned companies) funded from the federal budget should be covered under the policy.

On April 18, the *Daily Champion* (Lagos) reported that the president had convened a meeting with some of the chief executives of parastatal bodies and had agreed to set up a committee to verify the cost implications before payment of the monetisation policy could be effected. The anonymous source also told the newspaper that the government wanted to sack staff in parastatal agencies before payment could begin.

Nigerian tanker drivers' strike called off

A strike by Nigerian tanker drivers belonging to the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) was suspended after five days at the end of April.

The dispute began in protest at the seizure of 40 petroleum tankers belonging to NUPENG members by the Lagos transport authority. The trucks had been parked on the road, and the transport authority said they were causing a hazard. The unions have been asking for suitable parking to be made available until the truck terminal to be provided by Lagos state government is completed.

The Lagos state government imposed a fine of between N50,000 (US$380) and N2.4 million (US$18,400) for each vehicle, which had to be paid before the tankers were released.

When the dispute began, Peter Akpatason, president of NUPENG, told the *Vanguard* (Lagos) that the tanker drivers had no money to pay the fines and warned that the strike might be extended to other parts of the country.

On April 30, the chief executive officer of Zenon Oil, Femi Otedola, paid the N2 million fine, expecting that the impounded vehicles would then be released. However, the government refused, saying the tankers would remain where they were until the drivers signed an undertaking not to park on the highway again.

Akpatason insisted that the signing of such an undertaking had not been part of the previous discussions, and he accused the state government of harbouring an ulterior motive.

After the personal intervention of the managing director of Conoil, the Lagos state government finally allowed the release of the seized tankers, without the drivers signing any undertaking. However, after the vehicles had been released, Yemi Odubela, chief executive of the Lagos State Transport Authority, announced that Alhaji Tokunbo Korodo, chairman of the Unions for Lagos State, had collected the undertaking paper on behalf of the union and accepted all the terms it contained.

NUPENG has now instructed its members to keep operations going non-stop, 24 hours a day, until the backlog has been cleared and fuel stations are back to normal.

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