

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

20 May 2005

Europe

Finnish paper workers continue nationwide strike

On May 16 paper workers in Finland continued their campaign of strike action following a breakdown in talks between trade unions and forest industry employers. The nationwide two-day industrial action involved 25,000 of the 50,000-strong Finnish Paper Workers Union and shut down large sections of the country's paper industry.

The workers are demanding compensation for extra work in the form of more holidays as opposed to a pay increase. Other issues involved in the dispute are the role of temporary employees and production breaks during national holidays.

Among the companies affected by the dispute are two of the world's biggest paper manufacturers, UPM-Kymmene Corp. and Stora Enso OYJ.

Following the stoppage forest industry managers said they would impose a lockout of workers unless a solution could be found in resumed talks with trade unions. The government of Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen stated that it supported a negotiated settlement.

Greek civil servants strike to protest government policies

Civil servants in Greece held a 24-hour strike on May 18. The action was called by the country's 200,000-member civil servants union,ADEDY, to protest the government's economic policies. Many sectors of the public sector were hit by the strike, including schools, hospitals and ministries.

Greek air traffic controllers held a four-hour work stoppage on the same day in support of the civil servants. The air traffic strike resulted in the cancellation of more than 40 flights and a further 50 being rescheduled. The state airline, Olympic Airlines, was forced to cancel 15 domestic return flights and modified departure times for another 26 flights. Aegean Airlines also cancelled flights and four foreign companies had to cancel services to Athens International Airport.

Belgium bus and train drivers strike

Trains and bus workers took strike action in Belgium on May 13 to protest new contracts that the rail company SNCB is about to sign with the government. Train drivers organised in the CGSP trade union began strike action in the morning,

two hours before the time originally announced.

Train drivers located at Mons and train guards, mainly at Charleroi and La Louviere, formed the main base of the strike. No trains ran between Mons and Hal, between Mons and Charleroi or between Charleroi and Brussels. The strike was supported by signalmen in Hainaut, who began a stoppage from midnight.

A statement from the union said, "These contracts currently contain employment objectives which are incompatible with the stated intention to increase the number of passengers and the quality of the services offered. By obliging the different companies which make up SNCB to balance their budget in 2008, the government is demanding de facto that the companies reduce their staff by 4,000 people."

The rail unions are meeting with the employers this week in an attempt to end the dispute.

The same day many bus drivers held strike action in Wallonia in a dispute over pay. On May 12, the Wallonian membership of the CGSP rejected a proposal by the conciliator in the negotiations with the TEC bus company management. The proposal included a pay increase of just 0.6 percent.

During the strike in Hainaut, 90 drivers at the Tournai depot refused to work. In Mons, 15 out of 188 drivers supported the strike. This resulted in 40 percent of Hainaut's TEC buses running and 60 percent of private buses continuing normally. Some bus services in Liege were affected by industrial action from 7 a.m. to 7.45 a.m. In Brabant, Lasne and Nivelles, bus services were heavily hit by the strike action.

Employees strike against Serbian trade union in unpaid wages dispute

Employees of the Alliance of Serbian Labour Unions began a strike on May 17 to demand the payment of unpaid wages from the trade union federation. The staff, who are members of the Independent Union, are owed wages that are now six months in arrears. The employees have stated that they will not return to work at the union until their wages are paid.

Alliance president Milenko Smiljanic announced this week that the union was not able to pay the wages as "there is

simply no money.” Smiljanic said that the income of the union had fallen due to redundancies among its members and irregular payments.

The Independent Union brings in revenue of €4 million each month in membership fees, as it is based on 2 percent of all earnings of its membership in Serbia.

Independent Union leader Slobodanka Brankovic, said, “Yes, it’s terrible that in Serbia 350,000 workers are not receiving their monthly wages. These people have no source of financing because their companies have collapsed, but we have a source from membership dues and I am asking what’s happened to that money.”

Africa

Namibian workers fired for defending colleague

Seventy-nine workers employed by Cymot, a Namibian hardware and outdoor leisure equipment dealership, were fired after refusing to attend a disciplinary hearing that had been called after the end of a wildcat strike.

Cymot—one of Namibia’s largest dealers in their line of business, employing just over 300 people—had provoked the original strike by sacking a shop steward, Albertus Cloete, for alleged insubordination. Prior to being sacked, Cloete had been subjected to an unfair hearing, similar to the one planned for those who defended him.

The strike was called off by the Metal and Allied Namibia Workers’ Union, which hoped that the Office of the Labour Commissioner would mediate and secure Cloete’s reinstatement.

The response of management was to demand that the 79 workers attend a disciplinary hearing. The workers refused to attend on four separate occasions, because the hearing was to be conducted by labour consultant Holger Fircoulomb, who was a Cymot employee. Their refusal was used as a justification for their dismissal.

The workers have appealed against the dismissal notice.

Ghanaian stevedores protest over poor conditions

On May 12, workers at the Speedline Stevedoring Company in Ghana held a protest strike and demonstration to demand improved conditions of service due to the dilapidated and dangerous condition of the equipment they were forced to use.

According to the *Ghanaian Chronicle* (Accra), the demonstrators locked two members of the management inside their offices to prevent them from opening the entrance to the factory during the demonstration. Members of the Harbour Police later released the two men.

Fifty-eight of the workers had signed an eight-page petition outlining their complaints, which they wanted to present to the chairman of the company’s board of directors. The petition explained that many of the company’s forklift trucks are worn out. Other vehicles, including an ambulance,

had been left to rust and other items of equipment had been misused and broken (under orders from management). For two years management had refused to provide necessary protective clothing, such as safety helmets, footwear and uniforms.

The petition also highlighted the workers’ concern at the low salaries paid to all categories of staff compared to other companies in the industry, such as the Ghana Ports and Harbours Authority.

Workers told the *Ghanaian Chronicle* that payments to retired workers had not been honoured, pushing their families into poverty. Also causing anger amongst the workers was the way that managers had been allowed to take loans of up to 80 million cedis [US\$8,960], while more junior staff were refused loans of only 3 million cedis [US\$336].

The workers demonstrated outside the gates of the company until the chairman of the board agreed to receive their petition.

South African workers protest against privatisation

Approximately 2,000 members of the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) downed tools and marched through the centre of Cape Town on May 17 in protest against government plans to privatise basic services such as water and electricity. The march had been declared to be lawful after an application by SAMWU to the Labour Court.

The workers marched to the Cape Town Convention Centre, where an “African Utility Week “ conference was discussing “full-cost recovery” and the expansion of pre-paid metering for water and electricity. They then proceeded to the civic centre to hand over a memorandum demanding that all privatisation initiatives should cease until there was a clear policy to guide restructuring.

But when they arrived at the civic centre, they were confronted by police carrying batons and riot shields. According to the South African Broadcasting Corporation, two workers were arrested in clashes with the police. In one incident, the police attacked members of the crowd with batons when they tried to prevent a demonstrator being “bundled into a van.”

A spokesperson for the city claimed that “any protest action should not be aimed at the City of Cape Town as they are either national matters or matters already agreed to by the union.”



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