

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

13 May 2005

Europe

BBC workers vote to strike to oppose job losses

On May 11, BBC journalists and broadcasting workers voted to strike in protest at plans to cut 3,780 jobs. The employees, members of the Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (Bectu) and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), voted in favour of a 12- or 24-hour industrial action that is expected to be held between mid-May and early June.

Workers voted by a large majority in favour of industrial action. While only half of Bectu's 5,000 members at the BBC cast a ballot, 77.6 percent of those who did voted for the strike. Almost two-thirds of the NUJ trade union membership at the BBC—3,500 workers—voted, with 83.9 percent supporting the strike action.

The strike may affect the broadcasting of news and sports programs, possibly including coverage of the Wimbledon tennis tournament and the FA Cup Final. Luke Crawley, the senior BBC official at Bectu, said, "We'll be looking to take action on days that will do the most damage to the BBC, and see if we can achieve blank screens and dead air."

The BBC is shedding the jobs as part of a restructuring operation aimed at increasing efficiency. The broadcaster is attempting to justify the job losses under the pretext that it would put more than £350 million a year back into programme-making.

Swedish paper workers support Finnish strike

On May 8, Swedish employees of Stora Enso announced that they would support the Finnish paper workers currently involved in a dispute with the same company. The Swedish workers said they would begin an overtime ban from May 16 through May 18. May 16 is the date when a threatened strike in the Finnish paper industry is set to begin. The overtime ban in Sweden will involve approximately 10,000 workers at all 10 Stora Enso mills.

The Swedish Paper Workers Union announced the measure after the Finnish Forest Industries' Federation threatened a two-week lockout of Finnish paper workers. Workers in Sweden are concerned that paper industry managers may consider implementing the same kinds of measures that the industry in Finland is demanding, including cuts in pay and increases in working hours. Management is justifying such measures on the basis of increasing the international competitiveness of the Finnish paper industry.

Bus, train drivers strike in Belgium

On May 9, bus drivers in Wallonia, Belgium went on strike. The drivers have rejected the current contract proposals of the Regional Walloon Transport Society, on the basis that they do not address security concerns of the staff and passengers on buses. The staff are also demanding a larger pay deal than that on offer from the firm.

The strike made a significant impact, with virtually every bus remaining at its depot. Management of the Regional Walloon Transport Society are to meet trade unions this week in an attempt to resolve the dispute.

The effect of the industrial action was compounded by a wildcat strike held by railway train guards the same morning. The stoppage began when guards at Brussels-Midi/Zuid walked off the job, and were followed by co-workers in La Louviere, Charleroi and Mons. The strike resulted in several trains being cancelled, and in delays on the scheduled routes to Liege, Namur, Charleroi-Sud and Mons.

Like the bus drivers, the train guards were protesting against inadequate security and safety measures.

Italian education staff protest at Ministry of Education

Trade union members in the Italian education sector held a rally outside the Ministry of Education in Rome on May 9. Demonstrators called for more investment in education, better integration of immigrant students, and more tertiary education choices for secondary school

students.

The education workers' unions issued a statement detailing the crisis in education in Italy. The statement read in part: "Today, the Italian school isn't capable of meeting the requests of students and parents, because the right to attend kindergarten isn't guaranteed, as statistics and long waiting lists prove; the request for permanent, full-time jobs isn't met either, even if schools are often understaffed; ministerial staff and building security parameters aren't met, nor are the structural ones of disabled students. Unjustified cuts have been going on for three years now; this can no longer go on."

Glasgow Underground industrial action called off

On May 5, a scheduled 48-hour strike by Glasgow Underground workers due to be held on May 6 was called off by trade union officials of the Transport and General Workers' Union, following negotiations with the Strathclyde Passenger Transport management.

The strike was to be the latest action by the subway staff in their long-running dispute over pay and conditions. The union is to hold a mass meeting of members this weekend to discuss SPT's latest offer.

The previous week the Transport and General Workers' Union had recommended the workers accept an offer they described as a "greatly improved." However, talks broke down just days later. The threatened strike action was then abandoned following the resumption of negotiations.

Africa

Eritrean trade union leaders arrested

Three trade union leaders have been arrested in Eritrea, and their exact whereabouts is unknown.

Tewelde Ghebremedhin, chairman of the Food, Beverages, Hotels, Tourism, Agriculture and Tobacco Workers Federation, and Minase Andezion, secretary of the textile and leather workers' federation, were arrested on March 30, and remain in detention.

On April 9, police arrested Habtom Weldemicael, leader of the Coca-Cola Workers Union and a member of the food and beverage workers' federation executive. Some reports suggested that he had been advising workers to take industrial action to oppose the rapid decline in their living standards.

All three are being held without charge and without any communication channels, in violation of the constitutionally defined 48-hour maximum period for

such a process. They are reported to have been detained in a secret, high-security prison in Asmara.

Amnesty International has stated: "Human rights violations continue in Eritrea on a massive scale. Thousands of government critics and political opponents—many of them prisoners of conscience who have not used or advocated violence—are detained in secret." The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, and the international textile and catering union federations are calling for the release of the three men.

Kenyan medical college workers strike again

On May 6, over 1,500 lecturers and other workers brought 25 Kenya Medical Training Colleges (KMTCs) to a standstill, in a new twist to a long-running dispute over pay. Their boycott has affected the studies of 8,000 students in the state-run KMTCs throughout the country.

The strikers are angry that they were not included in a pay deal conceded by the government to civil servants. In the past, KMTC workers received pay rises in line with those of civil service employees.

"How can we be classified as a parastatal [partly government-controlled agency], yet we earn less than our counterparts in the health ministry?" asked one of the strikers in a report by the Kenyan newspaper, the *Nation*.

Meanwhile, a deadline set by the Kenya Union of Civil Servants is due to expire on May 13, and 120,000 members are expected to go on strike in pursuance of a 600 percent pay increase. The union's secretary-general, Alphayo Nyakundi, said that all 74 branches are now on alert, and they will go on strike as planned.



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