Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

27 May 2005

Europe

Netherlands: doctors strike to oppose government health plans

On May 25, the majority of doctors in the Netherlands began a three-day strike to protest reforms in the health-care system. The action involved at least 90 percent of 8,000 registered GPs, according to the doctors association LHV.

Nearly all surgeries were closed to normal appointments, with only emergency treatment and care for the terminally or chronically ill patients being administered.

Doctors are protesting plans by Health Minister Hans Hoogervorst which could lead to cuts in income. The proposals would force doctors to negotiate with insurers next year over funding for surgery costs. The government plans to implement the proposals as part of a new basic health-care insurance policy in 2006.

The doctors plan to hold a further strike in two weeks if the government does not withdraw or amend its plans.

Coca-Cola workers strike in Russia

On May 20, some 25 workers took strike action at a Coca-Cola bottling plant in St. Petersburg, Russia. The employees are demanding that company management increase their pay by linking salaries to inflation and adhere to labour laws and trade union rights.

The chairman of the trade union at the plant stated that workers sometimes have to work six or seven days a week, or even more consecutive days. Other grievances cited were that staff work long hours and have to change working hours at short notice. According to the trade union, the more than 300 employees at the plant have not had a pay increase linked to inflation for years.

Coca-Cola has denied that the plant management violates labour laws, and contested a number of the trade union claims. The human resources manager at Coca-Cola HBC Eurasia said that the company regularly raises the salaries of its employees, “but on the basis of merit, not inflation.” The company plans to meet with trade union representatives next month to discuss the dispute.

Coca-Cola has 11 bottling plants in Russia. Coca-Cola HBC Eurasia is a Greek-owned bottling company of Coca-Cola.

Train guards in Merseyside, England continue strike

Railway guards in Merseyside, England continued their campaign to oppose the imposition of a new concessions-based contract by holding a 24-hour strike on May 21. The dispute centres on the demands that are to be attached to a contract that includes a new 35-hour working week for the staff.

In a ballot of the 170 Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members employed by Merseyrail the contract was rejected by 104 votes to 13.

Further strikes are planned for May 28, June 10 and July 9, pending the resolution of the dispute. In a statement following the strike ballot, the RMT said that the 35-hour-week would be paid for by staff losing their right to rest days and other agreed working practices.

Africa

Zambian police teargas demonstrators after mine disaster

Two miners were killed on May 18 in a pit accident at Mopani Copper Mines (MCM) in Mufulira in the Zambian Copper Belt. According to the *Post* (Lusaka), the two men died when a cage ruptured during its descent down a mineshaft. Twelve others were injured and two are as yet unaccounted for.

A survivor told the paper that he was in a lower cage when the cage above them ruptured and the men inside began falling off. He said that the cage was overloaded at the time. He added, “It’s not the first time a cage is rupturing. Two weeks ago a cage ruptured, but fortunately there was no one in it.”

When wives and families gathered outside the mine to enquire about their loved ones and to protest over the accident, police fired tear-gas into the crowd. Mwiche Mulenga told the paper, “My husband went for work in the morning and I am worried he might be dead, but police are treating us like animals. Every day my husband knocks off late because he says that the cage that takes miners underground is faulty. She asked, “Are we going to continue living like this, honestly?”

Journalists who had turned up to report the accident were told they had no business at the mine because it was private property.

Rayford Mbulu, deputy general secretary of the Mineworkers’ Union of Zambia, said that the number of accidents on the Copperbelt was regrettable. He said, “If you look at the number of accidents after privatisation and compare that to what occurred when they were being run by ZCCM (Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines), you will discover they mines were run much better then.”

Liberian electoral registrars on go-slow

Around 500 registrars staged a go-slow for one day on May 16 to oppose the attempt to reduce the number of their working days from the 29 days stipulated in their contract. The employers—the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and the National Elections Commission (NEC)—had hoped to reduce the number of days by excluding five Sundays.

Their action was reported to have paralysed the registration of voters around Monrovia, the capital. The go-slow was ended when UNMIL backed down and agreed to pay for the full 29 days.

Kenyan health staff strikes to demand pay rise

About 5,000 nurses at the Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) went on strike May 24. They are demanding a 600 percent salary increase, as well as increases in housing and other allowances, particularly for lower paid workers. The action has caused a severe crisis in the hospital.

Over 30,000 nurses in other hospitals will join the striking nurses unless the government increases their salaries and allowances by May 31.

The chairman of the Kenya Progressive Nurses Association, Gerald Njagi, accused Health Minister Charity Ngilu of failing to address the issues. He told the *Nation* (Nairobi) that when the nurses went on strike two months ago they were promised salary arrears and allowances. He added, “It is now emerging that she was just playing politics as we are yet to be awarded the pay rise.”

Ngilu has ruled out any pay rise for public nurses this year.

Around 500 Kenyan doctors have also threatened to strike unless they are paid their 10-month salary arrears. The *Nation* reported that doctors at KNH, the Moi Teaching and Referral hospitals and those teaching at the University of Nairobi complained of being overlooked when their colleagues at other public hospitals were given a pay rise in July 2004.

At a meeting at KNH on May 18 doctors passed a vote of no confidence in Ngilu, accusing her of mismanagement. They called for the suspension of senior managers at the hospital to enable fraud investigations to take place. The doctors said they would take strike action if their grievances were not addressed by June 8.

Botswana workers march to demand protection against victimisation

A series of marches to demand government action to protect workers from victimisation were planned to begin on May 21 and end on June 4, when a petition will be handed over to President Festus Mogae. The petition demands new legislation to bring Botswana’s labour laws in line with the standards of the International Labour Organisation.

The marches have been organised by the Botswana Federation of Trade Unions (BFTU) and the Public Service Workers Association (PWSA), representing workers in the private and government sectors. They are demanding legislation to protect workers from general victimisation, unfair dismissals and discrimination on the grounds of their HIV/AIDS status.

BFTU Secretary-General Henry Tebogo Makhale told *IRIN* the country’s present laws provided no safeguards and the draft national policy on HIV/AIDS, proposed as a guide for workplace mitigation programmes, lacks the necessary legal statutes to make it enforceable.

He said, “Going on strike, whether one works for government or the private sector, means victimisation or dismissal. The Botswana worker has nowhere to seek for help—many employers are hostile, abusive and insensitive.”

Makhale accused the government of ill-treating its own employees and said the private sector was doing the same because of the lack of any functional labour laws to protect workers. He told *IRIN* that last year the diamond mining giant, De Beers, sacked over 400 members of the Botswana Mine Workers Union after they took part in a two-week strike. The Botswana government and De Beers each hold a substantial stake in Debswana diamond mines.

The petition also demands that the government implement an effective national HIV/AIDS mitigation policy. Makhale said that the current policy does not even propose punishment for employers who violate their workers’ rights on the basis of HIV/AIDS. It shows the government is not yet serious in addressing the issues.

Makhale told *IRIN*, “HIV/AIDS-positive workers are still being heavily discriminated against, and prospective employees, notably apprentices in the mining sector, are still forced to undergo compulsory HIV/AIDS testing. Those who test positive are dropped and they have no legal options to follow...

“The labour laws should be redrafted, and take into account the freedom and well-being of the Botswana worker. Currently they serve only capitalist and employer interests, with the workers being treated as garbage. Testing HIV-positive in Botswana is still one of the quickest ways to earn a dismissal, because the same employers do not want to take the additional responsibility of providing health care to their productive workers.”

Egyptian textile workers on hunger strike

Around 400 striking textile workers at the Esco plant in Qalyoub, a small town to the north of Cairo, have been on strike since February 13 in protest against the privatisation of their factory and its sell-off to industrialist Hashem El-Deghi. According to *Al-Ahram Weekly*, the strikers claim that as soon as El-Deghi took over he threatened to fire workers and stopped paying their bonuses.

During the period of the dispute, which began with an occupation of the factory, the strikers have had to face a seven-week siege of the factory and attacks from state security officers who, according to the paper, arrived outside the factory in heavy-duty personnel carriers. They blocked the entrances to prevent anyone from contacting the strikers.

The General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) has opposed the action throughout. *Al-Ahran Weekly* reported that, following the two-day sit-in at GFTU headquarters on March 12 and 13, GFTU President El-Sayed Rashed told the strikers “to go back to work” or else “face punitive action.” The general secretary of the Textile Workers’ Union also told the paper that he was in no position to help because the workers “were taking on the government by challenging economic policies.”

The strikers have managed to survive by borrowing money and have received support from the community. However, including their families they have to feed at least 1,600 people, and have often gone hungry. Only when the workers began a hunger strike on May 9, without specifying any end-date, did management agree to negotiate.

Despite the fact that the new owner, El-Gilani, vowed they would not receive “a single penny,” they have now been offered seasonal contracts “guaranteeing them all the benefits given to workers under the new unified labour law [12/2003],” plus LE10,000 [US$1,730] per worker in place of an early retirement package and wage arrears for the last three months. This is far below the settlement figure demanded by the workers, but it seems that the majority of them have accepted the management offer. Esco worker Mohamed Gaber told *Al-Ahram Weekly*, “They are tired and hungry. You don’t know what it’s like not having the money to buy food for your family and to be responsible for that situation.”

According to the paper, the new contracts will provide no job security and will allow for hiring and firing at will.