

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

1 July 2005

## Europe

### Local government workers strike in Netherlands

On June 29, public transport workers in several cities and towns in the Netherlands struck for 24 hours to demand a pay increase. Trade unions representing 190,000 local government workers are involved in negotiations over pay and conditions and in May rejected an offer by the government.

Workers struck in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht from 6:00 a.m. local time.

The action disrupted bus and tram services at Amsterdam's Central Station and the entrances to metro stations were sealed off, reportedly for safety reasons. During the day many commuters in Amsterdam made their way to work on foot.

Metro and bus workers are not involved in the dispute.

More local government workers are expected to join industrial action in the coming period. The Abvakabo FNV and CNV-bond Publieke Zaak trade unions said that were further industrial action required, it would coincide with and disrupt the World Port Days in Rotterdam and Sail, the annual tall-ship event in Amsterdam in September.

### Greek workers continue protests against government attacks

On June 25, workers in Greece participated in a 24-hour general strike to protest changes in labour, social security and pension legislation planned by the government of Prime Minister Costas Caramanlis. The government also plans to extend shopping hours.

As well as opposing the government legislation, workers are demanding that the minimum monthly salary be raised to €1,200 euros (US\$1,450).

Many workers participated in the strike, including those employed by agencies in the public sector at airports, subways, trains, and suburban rail and city buses. Public hospitals, tax offices and other services operated only with emergency staff.

The action resulted in the cancellation of eight flights due to an ongoing strike by flight attendants employed on short-term contracts.

On June 25, bank workers who are involved in a three-week strike over the same issues voted to extend the action to a fourth week, until June 28. The previous day an estimated 4,000 protesters marched through central Athens in a demonstration against the government.

### Drivers at supermarket distribution centre in southern England vote to strike

Drivers at the Aylesford distribution centre of the Morrison supermarket chain in Kent, England are set to strike following a ballot in favour of industrial action this week.

The members of the GMB and the Transport and General Workers' Union are involved in a dispute over job security and conditions.

The unions have detailed a "catalogue" of problems and stated that the firm has brought in changes without any consultation. Paul Kenny, acting general secretary of the GMB, said of the dispute, "The highly profitable and competitive supermarket chains are acting as a conveyor belt to the downwards living standards, not only in the Third World, but in the distribution chain in Britain."

### Finnish paper workers dispute set to end

The six-week industrial action by Finnish paper workers in a dispute over pay is set to end, following an initial agreement between management and the trade unions. The paper workers union announced on June 29 an agreement had been made through the national mediator and that it would officially vote on it on July 1.

At this time no details of the agreement have been made available.

The dispute began in November last year, when forest industry employers refused to participate in nationwide pay talks. Following several weeks of trade union protests and unofficial strike action, on May 18 several

paper manufacturers, including Stora Enso and UPM-Kymmene, locked out their employees. The dispute led to the closure of dozens of paper mills and involved more than 24,000 workers.

Paper accounts for one-quarter of Finland's exports and it is estimated that the dispute cost the industry €40 million per day in lost sales.

The government said that the impact of the strike could result in a cut of one percentage point off the country's economic growth target. The strike had global implications and there were fears of a paper shortage in Europe, as Finland produces 60 percent of European magazine paper.

## **Africa**

### **Zambian shop workers strike against poverty wages**

More than 900 Zambian employees of food retailer Shoprite Checkers walked out on strike on June 25. The strike is the second national strike at Shoprite in less than two years.

Most Shoprite employees are casual workers, with many working 24 hours per week to earn K22,000 (US\$5—just over 20 cents an hour) or even less if sales are below the target figure. According to a survey carried out by the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), even when workers increase their hours beyond 24 they receive no extra pay. They receive no benefits of any kind.

The strikers are demanding permanent employment, a higher basic salary, a company pension and allowances for housing, medicine, transport and funeral costs. While the workers want a salary increment of K500,000 (US\$110) including allowances, Shoprite management are offering only K180,000 (US\$40) minus 5 percent for the company's contribution to the pension scheme.

General secretary of the National Union of Commercial & Industrial Workers, John Bwalya, told UNI-Africa News, "Shoprite conditions are very bad.... Because of the high unemployment rate in the country, investors are taking the opportunity to exploit and victimise workers."

Shoprite has become the largest retailer in Africa, now having more than 700 shops in 16 countries and employing around 63,000.

### **Swaziland civil servants strike to win pay parity**

On June 23, teachers and other government

employees in Swaziland went on strike for a day and launched protests to demand salary increases comparable to the army and firefighters.

Military personnel were recently given an increase of up to 50 percent. Firemen were awarded R50 million (US\$7.3 million) in back pay, dating from 1994, following their increase.

Gladys Thwala, a primary school teacher, told IRIN (part of the UN), "It is unfair and insulting that the security forces are taken care of, but teachers must always protest [to get an increase]."

The teachers went on strike only two days after nurses walked out over their low salaries. The International Monetary Fund and other bodies have demanded that the government reduces the size and cost of the public sector workforce.

### **Ugandan cotton workers strike to demand payment of wages**

Around 200 casual workers at Cottco Uganda in Masindi went on strike on June 20. They had not been paid for the past two months, and the ginnery where they work has been sold to new management without their knowledge. Cottco Uganda is an NGO that produces cotton.

"Today, we saw new people registering everything. We learnt that the managing director, Mr. Stephen Kashaia, sold it and went away," a labourer told the Kampala-based newspaper *theMonitor*. The management had not been at the workplace for more than a month.

### **Mozambican hotel workers strike**

On June 28, workers at the Pemba Beach Hotel, in the northern Mozambican city of Pemba, began a three-day strike to demand an increase in pay in line with the recently decreed 14 percent increase in the statutory minimum wage in the industrial and service sector of the economy.

Management insists that the strike is illegal because they did not receive prior notice of the action. They claim that all the increases will be paid in July.



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