

# Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

26 August 2005

## **British Rolls Royce workers strike following dismissal of union representative**

On August 22, workers employed by the auto manufacturer Rolls Royce in Bristol, England, began strike action following the sacking of an Amicus trade union official.

The strike involved action by 96 test facility engineers and could continue for an indefinite period, according to Amicus.

The industrial action is the first at the plant in nearly 20 years. The dispute began when the company sacked official Jerry Hicks. Rolls Royce claimed that he had attempted to organise industrial action earlier in the summer and had undermined disciplinary procedures. The official has denied these claims, and the trade union has called for the full reinstatement of the union official, who has been employed at Rolls Royce for 30 years.

According to the union, around 1,000 employees at the plant could also be balloted for industrial action. Hundreds of Rolls Royce employees and Amicus members were scheduled to attend a rally August 25 in support of Hicks in the town of Derby, where Rolls Royce has another plant.

## **Train signal tower staff in Belgium capital strike to protest new rosters**

Signal tower employees at the Brussels South train station in Belgium walked out in an unofficial stoppage between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. local time on August 23. The staff protested at the introduction of a new workplace roster and a lack of communication with management.

The action led to severe rail disruptions in and around the Belgian capital, mainly on the busy north-south line of the network.

A spokesman for the ACOD trade union said, "The staff are dissatisfied over the new rolling stock roster in the signal house that will be introduced from September. More generally, there is a problem of dialogue with management."

## **Fruit pickers at farm in Herefordshire, England, stage sit-in to demand better pay and conditions**

On August 18, fruit pickers employed at a fruit farm in Herefordshire staged a sit-down to demand more pay and better conditions.

The 300 workers, who are of eastern European origin, staged the action on the Leominster-to-Hereford highway, and the company called the police to have the staff removed from the road. The workers are employed by S&A Produce, which is one of the area's biggest fruit farms and the biggest strawberry farm in Europe.

S&A employs some 1,500 staff at Brierley, near Leominster, under the seasonal agricultural workers scheme.

Some employees claim that are being paid just £40 (US\$72) a week. The BBC quoted one of the striking workers saying, "They don't respect us. They treat us like animals."

Staff at the fruit farm are contracted to work for 12 weeks up until September.

## **Italian transport minister declares upcoming strike action by flight attendants illegal**

On August 23, the Italian transport minister, Pietro Lunardi, announced that a planned strike by Alitalia SpA's flight attendants would be declared illegal. Lunardi said, "It's unacceptable that, in such a delicate moment for Alitalia, people do not give up strikes and their own selfish interests." His declaration effectively means that those workers who participate in the strike will face sanctions from the government as well as from the company. Strikes in the transportation industry between July 27 and September 4, the peak of the holiday season, are banned in Italy.

The 48-hour industrial action is due to begin on August 30 and is over the issue of trade union recognition. The airline said that it refused to recognise the union, claiming that it did not participate in negotiations to renew the flight attendants' contract last year and did not sign new contracts either last year or

this year.

The Sult union, representing about 25 percent of Alitalia's 4,000 flight attendants, called the strike after the airline announced three weeks ago that it did not recognise the union. The union has stated that it opposes plans by Alitalia Chief Executive Giancarlo Cimoli to cut 1 billion euros (US\$1.22 billion) in costs in order to return Alitalia to profit after six years of operating losses.

The de-recognition of the union would mean that the company would not allow Sult members time off for union activities. Sult will also lose revenue, as Italian trade unions are financed with about 1 percent of their members' pay, disbursed by the company to the union. Sult has called five strikes this year that have resulted in Alitalia being forced to cancel a number of flights.

### **South African furniture workers strike over pay**

Around 2,000 furniture workers have been on strike in the Western Cape of South Africa for more than three weeks, in a dispute to win higher pay increases. The original demand of the National Union of Furniture and Allied Workers (NUFAW) was for a 15 percent increase, but this has now been lowered to 8 percent.

Half the original strike force of 4,000 members of the NUFAW have returned to work, after the union made deals on a factory-by-factory basis. Those that are still on strike face employers who are negotiating through the Cape Furniture Manufacturing Association. It has offered 5.5 percent.

Gerald Yosh, managing director of furniture manufacturer Coricroft, claimed to *Cape Argus* (Cape Town) that the industry was "ailing," having already been hit by the strong rand. He said that unless the union came to its senses, the industry would "go in the same direction" as the clothing and textile industries.

This was denied by Keith Booyesen, the chairman of the union in the Western Cape, who said that the furniture industry was far from ailing and, as some companies were liquidated, others were opened. He pointed out that some manufacturers had agreed to increases of up to 13 percent, adding, "Manufacturers are making money. If they want to continue making money off the sweat of their workers, they cannot pay them peanuts."

### **Namibian teachers vote to strike during exams**

On August 18, members of the Namibia National Teachers' Union (Nantu) working in central Namibia

voted for a national strike, after the government reneged on its promise to improve the salaries and benefits of long-serving teachers. In addition, 191 teachers who were appointed more than 18 months ago on new salary scales have been demoted and their salaries have been reduced. They were told they have been "overpaid" and will have to pay back the extra amount they have received.

According to the *Namibian* (Windhoek), on August 12 Education Minister Nangolo Mbumba informed Nantu that the promise of a universal salary structure for all teachers, which was announced in January 2004, was "incorrect" and that the appointment of 191 teachers at higher salaries since February of last year was "erroneous."

The paper reported that about 400 teachers from Windhoek and Okahandja instructed their regional leaders to notify the government that they will "strike when it hurts the most"—during the year-end exams. One teacher who spoke at the meeting was quoted as saying, "It's a bread-and-butter issue and we want action now.... We must let the government feel the pinch.... We will strike at the most crucial time."

The meeting called for action by all teachers in Namibia. A similar call is expected from other branches. The National Governing Council (NGC) of Nantu has instructed regional leaders to consult and report their findings at an emergency meeting set for August 23. The *Namibian* has reported that some of the 191 demoted teachers have instructed lawyers to take the government to court for breach of contract.

The Teachers' Union of Namibia has pledged its support for Nantu if the government refuses to back down.

Education Deputy Minister Becky Ndjoze-Ojo has issued a statement declaring that teaching is a noble profession and the government does not expect teachers to strike.

In response, one teacher commented, "You want me to be productive and to exercise professionalism on an empty stomach?"



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