

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

5 August 2005

Europe

Doctors' protest in Germany demands better pay and conditions

Doctors in Germany demonstrated August 1 to demand better pay and working conditions. Thousands of doctors are estimated to have participated in the demonstrations. Some of those attending chanted and held placards with slogans saying, "We've had enough, let's go abroad."

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper said of the dispute, "Even today, several thousand doctors turn their backs on German hospitals every year because they find much more attractive conditions in other European countries."

Many junior doctors also protested at having to work up to 50 hours per week.

Workers strike local paper in England

Journalists and photographers employed at the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* began an indefinite strike on August 2. The 40 staff claim that a pay-banding scheme that was to be introduced in April has been delayed by the company. The workers are members of the National Union of Journalists and have already held 14 days of intermittent industrial action during the dispute.

The company said the strike did not affect the production of the newspaper, which has a circulation of 58,000. A spokesman for the *Evening Telegraph* said the company hoped to resolve the dispute and implement a "pay-for-competence structure for staff" with the assistance of the union.

Edinburgh bus drivers take unofficial strike action

On August 3 bus drivers in Edinburgh took unofficial strike action a week before a scheduled strike is due to be held. The action resulted in more than half of the company's buses being halted. Staff walked off the job in response to a letter from their employer, Lothian Buses, offering a 5 percent pay rise over 14 months.

The wildcat strike ended following an intervention by the Transport and General Workers Union, who called on the staff to return to work. The union told drivers that unofficial industrial action jeopardized official negotiations.

Drivers have already rejected a pay offer of 4.2 percent over 12 months and held their first industrial action in the

dispute on July 18. The firm increased its offer of 4.2 percent to 5 percent just prior to the strike and based the proposed deal on extra conditions of employment.

Drivers have also staged an overtime ban since the beginning of the dispute. Nearly 1,400 staff drivers voted to take industrial action to bring their pay up to £9 an hour. Drivers currently earn just under £8.50 an hour.

The strike is the first to be held by drivers at Lothian Buses in 25 years.

Workers strike at Ansa Logistics

Workers at Ansa Logistics in England began two weeks of strike action on August 2 in a dispute over pay cuts, jobs losses and compulsory redundancies. The strike involves some 350 drivers, fitters and support staff. The workers are members of the Transport and General Workers' union.

The stoppage is set to affect the deliveries of new Ford cars to showrooms and will initially disrupt Ford sites in Southampton, Dagenham and Liverpool. T&G official Ron Webb commented, "Ansa and Ford have not been easy to deal with. The goalposts in our negotiations seem to shift all the time. First it was wage cuts and compulsory redundancies. Then improved productivity was added and then increased flexibility was demanded."

Firefighters in Suffolk, England strike in dispute over job losses

On August 2 striking firefighters in Suffolk returned to work following a three-hour strike. The workers were protesting a decision by Suffolk County Council to cut 12 specialist jobs manning the turntable ladder in Bury St. Edmunds.

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has argued that the cuts will affect the safety of crews and the public. The council claimed it would use the funds it saved to train more retained officers.

The FBU plans to organise further strike action on August 5 and the following week.

Africa

South African gold miners to strike

On August 4 about 80,000 South African gold miners will begin strike action, the first throughout the industry since 1987. The employers' Chamber of Mines has offered the two unions involved, the National Union of Mineworkers

(NUM) and Solidarity, a pay rise of between 4 and 5 percent against the NUM's claim of 12 percent and Solidarity's of 10 percent. There are also disputes over job grading and pension funding.

The employers claim that 80 percent of gold production in South Africa—the world's largest gold producer with 14 percent of total output—is “marginal or unprofitable.”

South African chrome workers attacked by security guards

About 1,000 workers at Xstrata Chrome, South Africa, began strike action this week and were attacked by security guards firing tear gas. According to a spokesman for National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), about 250 peaceful strikers outside the Xstrata Rustenburg plant were attacked with rubber bullets and tear gas when a security vehicle rammed the crowd. At least seven strikers were reported to have suffered injuries; one with broken ribs and a twisted ankle was taken to hospital.

Xstrata withdrew its wage offer of 8.75 percent last week after two months of negotiations. The union, which had been asking for a 10 percent wage increase for the lowest paid workers, called industrial action.

South African municipal workers take action

Following three days of strike action last week the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) is calling for a further strike next week for an indefinite period. The union has dropped its demand for a wage increase of 9 percent or R400 (US\$60) to 8 percent or R350 (US\$52.50) but is keeping the demand for a new minimum wage of rand 3,000 (US\$449) per month.

Demonstrations in support of the pay claim took place in a number of cities, including Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. In Johannesburg about 70 people were arrested after gathering outside the civic hall and police fired rubber bullets and teargas canisters at the crowd of some 2,000 Samwu members.

The strike for more pay by 20,000 workers employed by the supermarket chain Pick 'n Pay that started July 22 is still continuing. Workers in a number of other sectors are also threatening strike action.

There are press reports of growing anger amongst South African workers over the widening gap between their low pay and the salaries of executive directors, which increased by an average of 38 percent last year. Between 2003 and 2004 the average gap between directors' pay and average minimum workers' wages in South Africa over all sectors increased from 111:1 to 150:1.

Zambian agricultural workers strike

Workers at York Farms, one of the biggest employers in Zambia producing food for European supermarkets, have taken strike action. According to the *Times of Zambia*, the

member of parliament for the farm at Chawama, Zambia's Commerce Deputy Minister Geoffrey Samukonga, was called in by the farm's management to plead with the workers to return.

The *Times* reports that the dispute is over poor working conditions, but gives no comment from the strikers. Management stated that, in accordance with recent negotiations with the workers' union, the casual labourers will receive K6,580 (\$1.45) per day while the full-time workers will be paid K7,435 (\$1.63).

Strikes in Zimbabwe

Junior doctors have again resorted to strike action throughout Zimbabwe, calling for an 800 percent salary increase and improvements in conditions of service. Doctors struck just two months ago over fuel allocation as the country, with an economy in a state of near collapse, is running out of gasoline supplies.

The doctors are demanding provision of basic resources in the hospitals—drugs, protective clothing and methylated spirits. Their spokesman, Dr. Takarunda Chinyoka, president of the Zimbabwe Medical Doctors Association, said they wrote a letter two months ago to the government over their concerns but have received no response.

Thousands of health-care workers have left Zimbabwe for jobs in Europe and South Africa, given the current state of the country. State hospitals have little functioning equipment or drugs because of the lack of foreign currency to pay suppliers.

Workers in the printing and packaging industry in Zimbabwe have also taken strike action, demanding a 200 percent pay rise as well as housing and transport allowances. Madzivo Chimhuka, secretary-general of the Zimbabwe Graphical Workers' Union (ZGWU) representing 5,000 workers, said there would be no return to work as his members were “living like paupers.”



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