Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

12 August 2005

Heathrow airport staff strike catering firm in unofficial action

On August 10, 500 workers employed by catering firm Gate Gourmet took unofficial strike action at Heathrow airport in London in a dispute over contracts and the hiring of seasonal staff.

The action disrupted 250 British Airways flights and 70 flights of other airlines. No dishes were prepared by staff, and the airlines were forced to open up "emergency feeding stations" for passengers about to board long-haul flights. Most flights took off without food and with just water, tea and coffee available.

The industrial action began in the morning when Gate Gourmet staff staged a sit-in. In an attempt to break the strike, management used megaphones to instruct the afternoon shift, who were gathered in a car park, to return to work or face immediate dismissal. The company then sacked the workers, stating that they had carried out "un-balloted strike action and a breach of contract."

Gate Gourmet, the UK's biggest supplier of in-flight catering, is owned by Texas Pacific, a US private equity fund. The company employs 2,000 workers in total at Heathrow.

Prior to the strike, the firm had been in talks with the Transport and General Workers Union regarding a programme of restructuring including redundancies and a £14 million reduction in labour costs. The company said that without such cuts it would not survive.

Dunnes Store staff strike in north Dublin

On August 11, 80 retail workers employed at a Dunnes Stores in north Dublin began a 24-hour strike to protest a cut in their working hours. According to the Mandate trade union, the company has reduced staff hours without any consultation. A spokesman for the union said that management at the store also refused to enter into dialogue on the matter.

Security staff at Eurostar depots in England vote to strike

On August 3, staff employed by the Chubb security firm at Eurostar depots voted unanimously to strike in a dispute over union recognition. The workers are members of the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union.

Depots in Ashford, Kent and London Waterloo are affected. The union said this week that dates for industrial action would be announced shortly.

Employees who provide services for Eurostar are also being balloted over union recognition. The workers are employed by Momentum Services Ltd., and the ballot for industrial action closed on August 11.

Union in Sefton, England, calls off strike by council workers

A planned strike by council workers in Sefton, Merseyside, was suspended on August 11 pending a decision being made on the suspensions of six members of the UNISON trade union next week. The industrial action was due to take place on August 16 and 17. The workers held a 24-hour strike on August 9.

Local union branch chairman Glen Williams said, "A decision on the suspensions will be provided by the employer on August 17. We thought it was wise to suspend the strike until then."

South African gold miners strike

About 110,000 South African gold miners have been on strike this week, in what is said to be the biggest industrial action in the gold-mining sector for 18 years. The gold-mining companies Anglogold Ashanti and South Deep (a joint venture of South Africa's Western Areas and Canada's Placer Dome) increased their pay offer to between 5.25 and 6.5 percent at the beginning of the week, whilst Harmony and Gold Fields also made improved offers for about 5 to 6 percent Wednesday.

The unions involved, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), representing 100,000 black miners, and Solidarity, representing mainly white workers, are calling for rises of between 8 and 10

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percent and have rejected the improved offers. They have told reporters that their "point of reference" in ongoing negotiations is a pay rise of 7 to 8 percent. It appears that the employers have made separate offers and broken away from their organisation, the Chamber of Mines, making negotiations more difficult.

The unions are also raising the issue of miners' living conditions. Three quarters of South Africa's 200,000 miners are still living in hostels, a legacy from the apartheid era, when miners were forced to leave their families in townships long distances away. The unions want the allowance for finding family accommodation to be doubled, but the employers are offering only a 10 percent rise.

Gold production accounts for 8 percent of South Africa's exports, and South Africa is still the world's biggest producer. But it faces stiff competition—its share of the world's gold production has fallen from 80 percent in 1970 to its current level of 14 percent. In defence of their pay claim, the unions point to the increase in the value of the rand and increased gold prices over the last two years.

Municipal workers continue action in South Africa

About 80,000 municipal workers, members of the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU), are on strike over pay. Their dispute has resulted in clashes with the police, and the union is considering legal action over the use of stun grenades and rubber bullets. Police claim they were forced to use these measures because protesters in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal were allegedly damaging property. SAMWU President Petrus Mashishi blamed the police for the disturbances, saying that "the workers got angry with police when they shot at them during a peaceful march." SAMWU has alleged that in a protest held in Germiston on the East Rand, the police used live ammunition as well as stun grenades and rubber bullets, with at least 10 people injured.

Negotiations between the union and the employers are continuing, with the local government association offering a 6 percent pay rise and the union demanding 8 percent.

Zimbabwe doctors threatened with jail

Striking junior and middle-ranking doctors were told by Zimbabwe's Minister of Health and Child Welfare, David Parirenyatwa, and his deputy, Edwin Muguti, that they must either return to work or face detention under the Essential Services Act, which prohibits strikes in essential services.

"Muguti told us that we were not doctors but medical interns and threatened us with arrest," said one doctor to the *Zimbabwe Standard* newspaper, requesting anonymity for fear of victimisation. The doctors also claim that they were being visited by people suspected to be Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) agents, telling them that it was for their own good to return to work.

Zimbabwe Medical Doctors Association President Takarunda Chinyoka said the doctors had called off the strike on "humanitarian grounds," but admitted they had been threatened. He said that hundreds of patients had been turned away from hospitals, with only emergencies being treated, and that several patients had died.

The doctors were calling for an 800 percent salary increase and improvements in conditions of service. They are also demanding provision of basic resources in the hospitals—drugs, protective clothing and methylated spirits—as the Zimbabwean health service faces collapse.

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