

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

9 September 2005

## Europe

### French oil refinery staff strike

French oil refinery workers employed by oil company Total SA took industrial action on September 7. The stoppage disrupted production at Total's refineries in Normandy, Donges, Feyzin and Grandpuits. The Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) trade union reported that it had called on workers to strike in protest at sanctions imposed on four employees after a "technical incident" on August 7 at the Provence refinery, near Marseilles. The incident reportedly caused a mist of diesel fuel to come down on neighbouring land and houses.

The union agreed to end the strike after Total agreed to reduce the sanctions it had placed on the workers. The company said that the four workers will still be demoted and said that they were guilty of "gross misconduct." A spokesman for the trade union said, "We can't accept seeing Total putting all the blame on workers. The management also bears responsibility for what happened."

### First Bus drivers strike in east Scotland

Bus drivers employed by First Bus in the east of Scotland held a 24-hour strike on September 7 over pay and conditions. Up to 600 employees are involved in the dispute. During the action, more than 300 bus services in Stirling, Falkirk, Edinburgh and the Lothians were cancelled. An estimated 100,000 bus passengers were affected.

The drivers are members of the Transport and General Workers Union and struck following a vote by a majority of 539-49. Drivers are seeking an increase in pay from the current rate of £7.40 an hour to £8. A further 24-hour strike is planned for September 13.

### Alitalia cabin crew strike in dispute over restructuring

Cabin crew employed by the Italian airline Alitalia

began a two-day strike on September 7 in a dispute over restructuring plans by the company. The SULT trade union said that at least 30 flights had been cancelled as a result of the industrial action by its members.

The airline has refused to negotiate with the union and announced that it would proceed with restructuring plans in an attempt to cut losses that exceeded 800 million euros (US\$998.6 million) last year.

### Finnish broadcasting staff oppose job losses

On September 6, 2,500 employees at Finland's public broadcaster YLE took strike action to protest plans to shed up to 200 jobs. The industrial action led to TV and radio stations being taken off the air.

YLE chief executive Mikael Junger condemned the action as illegal and said the job losses were being made because of heavy financial losses. YLE is set to record losses of \$56 million (£30 million) this year. YLE is Finland's most watched broadcaster with two national television channels, three digital channels and several radio stations that are listened to by 70 percent of the population.

## Middle East

### Construction workers in Qatar end strike

Six hundred construction workers employed by four local private engineering firms and one United Arab Emirates-based firm ended their strike action in Doha this week.

The action ended following a meeting of their employers and the National Human Rights Committee at the Indian Embassy. The strike began on August 28 and ended on September 5 and was the first to be held since the Qatar constitution granted the right to strike in June. The workers, who are mostly of Indian origin, were protesting the non-payment of salaries and demanding better living conditions. Some of the workers had not received pay for two to six months and

did not have medical facilities.

The contracting company has now agreed to immediately pay staff one month's salary arrears and the rest by the end of October. The agreement also specifies that the NHRC, a Qatari government body, look into the issue of workers' living conditions.

## Africa

### Nigerian hospital staff strike

A strike of Nigerian health workers employed in hospitals across the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) began at midnight on August 30. The strikers, including resident doctors, nurses, pharmacists and laboratory attendants, are demanding the payment of a 22 percent salary increase agreed three months ago and already implemented in other states. According to the strikers, the necessary resources have been budgeted for in this year's FCT finances.

The strikers are also protesting poor staff living accommodation, unsatisfactory conditions of service and poor working conditions.

Dr. Charles Nzelu, FCT chairman of the Association of Resident Doctors, told the *Vanguard* (Lagos) that, having issued a one-week strike notice, the health workers have embarked on an indefinite strike. He said that they were "defying all attempts by the authorities to discourage them from carrying out their plan until the authorities yield to their demands."

One striker commented, "We are ready to go on with the strike for as long as it will take them to yield to our cries for justice and fairness. We are fighting and asking for our right."

Emergency cases are being treated.

### Strike of Senegalese rail workers

Employees of Transrail walked out on strike on September 5 in protest against low rates of pay and working conditions they denounce as being "not far off slavery."

They left the railway workshops and company offices and marched to a demonstration outside the administration headquarters, before heading off for a mass meeting. According to *Sud Quotidien*, about 700 rail workers are waiting for a one-off payment of 100,000 francs and the installation of a wage structure, both of which have been agreed by the administration.

The railway, which has been running between Dakar in Senegal and Bamako in Mali since 1924, was sold to the Franco-Canadian joint venture Canac-Getma in

2003. Almost half of the 2,800 labour force of Senegalese and Malian railway workers were made redundant at the time of the privatisation deal.

The strike was ended after a day and a half, when management promised to address the issues. A meeting is scheduled for September 13 between the National Union of Rail, Maritime & Transport Workers and the management, to be followed by a mass meeting on September 14.

### South African fish processing industry brought to a standstill

At least eight large-scale fishing companies in Saldanha, St. Helena Bay, Gansbaai, Lamberts Bay and Cape Town were forced to close on August 31, when 4,000 workers went on strike to demand a 7 percent wage increase and a 33 percent contribution for maternity benefit. They are also demanding a 17 percent off-season allowance.

The Food and Allied Workers Union said its members were under increased pressure because of the no-work-no-pay rule. Crisis meetings were held with the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration, and a new offer was made of a 6.7 percent wage increase, a 16.25 percent increase as an off-seasonal allowance and a maternity allowance that will increase over a three-year scale.

The strike, which was held at the height of the fishing season, ended on September 7.



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