

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

16 September 2005

## Europe

### Sacked Gate Gourmet catering workers lobby Britain's TUC

On September 12, hundreds of workers sacked by the in-flight catering company Gate Gourmet held a demonstration outside the Trades Union Congress in Brighton, England as part of their campaign to win reinstatement.

The delegation of mainly Asian women workers travelled from London to Brighton to lobby delegates arriving at the conference. Among the banners they held up were ones reading, "We want our jobs back."

On August 10, more than 600 employees of the catering company that subcontracts in-flight meals for British Airways were locked out and replaced by scabs, as a means of imposing mass redundancies. The sacked workers are members of the Transport and General Workers Union.

Over the next 24 hours ground staff employed by British Airways at Heathrow came out in solidarity and paralysed the airport. The TGWU instructed its members at BA to return to work, thus isolating the struggle of the catering workers. The union then agreed a deal with the company that stipulated that Gate Gourmet could impose up to 650 redundancies.

According to the TGWU, "around 300 of the 670 sacked workers and 400 of those still employed by Gate Gourmet have applied for redundancies."

Further negotiations between the union and Gate Gourmet were held this week. The company stated that despite the redundancy agreement it will not re-employ hundreds of the sacked workers it has previously described as "militants and "troublemakers."

### Greek workers protest government economic policies

Thousands of Greek workers protested against the government's economic policies in the city of Thessaloniki on September 10. An estimated 10,000 to 20,000 participated in the demonstration while the prime minister was delivering his annual keynote economic speech.

The protest was organised by the country's two largest unions, the GSEE and ADEDY. Among the chants heard at the protest were: "No privileges for capital, no austerity for workers." The demonstration follows a number of strikes and demonstrations held during the summer protesting the economic policies of the government. ADEDY said it would hold a 24-hour strike during October.

The previous day members of the Panhellenic Union of Nursing Staff (PASONOP) held a sit-down protest during a 24-hour strike in Thessaloniki. The union is calling on the government to increase the number of nurses at state hospitals. According to PASONOP, only 30,000 nurses are employed in Greece. This equates to only one nurse for every 40 patients.

### Polish distillery workers protest redundancies

Workers at the Polish Vodka Wyborowa distillery continued industrial action this week to protest job losses and redundancies. On September 5 workers occupied a building at the firm's Poznan headquarters and began a hunger strike. A further 80 workers took sick leave.

The action began following an agreement between management and trade unions to impose redundancies. The redundancies would result in

almost half the workforce being laid off. As part of the agreement the trade unions also agreed to cuts in workers' wages by up to 50 percent. Only 22 staff agreed to leave under the terms of the redundancy programme.

### Bus drivers in Scotland continue strike over pay

On September 13 bus drivers employed by First Bus in east Scotland held a second one-day stoppage in their ongoing pay dispute. The strike affects about 100,000 people who use the bus services.

The action involved between 600 and 800 drivers in Stirling, Falkirk, Edinburgh and the Lothians who are seeking a pay increase from £7.25 and £7.40 to one of £8 an hour.

A company spokeswoman said that the firm would not implement a pay increase at this stage and that "We remain willing to continue negotiations, but only if the union is able to put forward reasonable demands on behalf of its members."

### Security guards strike Eurostar cross channel service

On September 9, security guards at the British cross channel rail service Eurostar continued strike action in a dispute over pay. The workers are employed by the security firm Chubb and are striking at Eurostar's stations at London Waterloo and Ashford International in Kent.

The 130 employees, members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union, began industrial action in August. The RMT has rejected a proposed pay deal offered by Chubb. The strike action has involved walkouts over Friday, Saturday and Sunday with a total of four hours of industrial action per day.

Eurostar said the strike action did not affect the running of trains, which were operating as normal, "as contingency plans have been put in place with trained and security-cleared Chubb guards."

### Latvian teachers protest education cuts

Hundreds of Latvian teachers demonstrated outside the government cabinet headquarters in Riga on September 7. The teachers were protesting the low level of public funding for education.

Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis and Education Minister Ina Druvieta were met with jeering and shouting by the protesters, who are members of the Latvian Teachers Union.

The government has agreed to increase teachers' salaries 20 lats (28.5 euros) from January 1, 2006. The teachers are demanding that their pay is increased by 60 lats from the beginning of 2006.

## Middle East

### Iranian workers blockade major road

Around 300 factory workers from the small industrial town of Ghazveen, southwest Iran, blockaded the town's main road during a demonstration on September 7. The protestors from the Poushineh Baft factory said that some 700 workers had not been paid for more than six months. In total, they were owed 630 million rials (\$70,000). The protest lasted for several hours before state security forces were dispatched to disperse the crowd.

## Africa

### Zimbabwean lecturers strike

Academic staff at universities all over Zimbabwe took strike action on September 5, as the new academic year began. The institutions affected are the University of Zimbabwe, National University of Science and Technology in Bulawayo, Midlands State University in Gweru, Bindura University of Science Education and Chinhoyi University of Technology.

The lecturers are protesting that the 20 percent salary increase agreed by the government does not keep pace with the rapidly rising rate of inflation. They are also angry because the increase was only backdated to July this year instead of January.

The government insists that the strike is illegal and is urging the strikers to return to work.

#### **South African arbitration body hit by strike**

Around 360 out of a total of 400 employees of the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) went on strike on September 14, in a dispute over pay. They have set up picket lines outside several of the commission's offices.

The Commission Staff Association (CSA) rejected the CCMA's offer of a 5 percent rise, and is demanding 6 percent. The CCMA's acting director Mo Ally told a Reuters reporter of management's intention to keep the service going through the use of part-time employees and contractors to replace the striking workers.

#### **South African teachers go-slow**

Members of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, launched a go-slow on September 13.

The action was to protest the arrest of former regional secretary Siphon Miggels and shop steward Nontsikelo Songwini during a SADTU demonstration a week before. The demonstration was held in opposition to the renaming of some of the buildings at Muir College in honour of Enoch Mankayi Sontonga, composer of part of the national anthem.

Miggels and Songwini were held by police for 70 hours before being released on bail. They face several charges, including assaulting the police and public violence. In response the union has organised a "70-day" go-slow in which pupils are sent home at 11 a.m. each day.

On the first day of the go-slow, more than 100 pupils marched in support of the teachers and blockaded the entrance to an official building in Uitenhage. The *Herald Online* reported, "Hundreds of other pupils were seen leaving schools at 11 a.m. to observe SADTU's 70-day action programme."

Spokesman for the teachers, Zwelakhe Melane, told the *Herald* that the union was demanding the withdrawal of all charges against Miggels and Songwini. In addition they are calling for more learning support material, free stationery and books, free and compulsory education, major renovations of decaying schools, building more schools and the scrapping of Circular 48, a policy which dispense with the services of all temporary teachers from June this year.

#### **Protest action by Nigerian teachers**

Nigerian secondary school teachers held a demonstration outside the Ministry of Education on September 5 to protest the non-payment of their allowances for marking examination papers.

According to *This Day* (Lagos), teachers "stormed the gate of the ministry in the morning, threw stones to windows, barricaded the gate and prevented free flow of movement."

Some ministry officials told the paper that the non-payment had not been deliberate. They said that the Commissioner of Education was new at the department and that they had urged him to expedite the payment of the allowances.

#### **Ghanaian doctors take strike action**

Doctors at state hospitals across Ghana went on strike September 3 to demand back payment for overtime work. New patients are being refused treatment but those admitted to hospital before the strike began are not affected.

The strike was called by the Ghana Medical Association (GMA) to

protest the non-payment of overtime for four months. They want the arrears to include a 20.5 percent pay raise approved by the government for all civil servants in June.

The government has written to the GMA insisting that the stoppage is illegal under a 1993 law banning health and essential services workers from taking strike action. Ghana's National Labour Commission has also denounced the action. Danso Acheampong, the commission's deputy chairman, has threatened doctors with court proceedings if they do not "respect the law."

Patients requiring urgent treatment have been thronging the military hospital in the capital.

#### **Ghanaian police shoot three protesting workers**

On September 2, the Ghanaian police shot three people during a demonstration by former employees at the Normandy Gold mines. Newmont Ghana Gold Limited (NGGL) is now running the mining concession at Yamfo in the Tano North District of the Brong Ahafo.

One of the injured, Dauda, was a passer-by. He was severely injured and was rushed, along with the others, to a nearby hospital.

The protesters were demanding their severance compensation from NGGL, who took over the concession of the Normandy Gold mines. They were promised that they would either receive the payout or be re-engaged by Newmont.

A court at Yamfo has ruled that the workers were not entitled to compensation from Newmont, but that the company "may" consider some of them for recruitment. However, over the last two years, none of the workers has been taken on.

#### **Namibian teachers and pupils demonstrate to oppose low pay**

On September 13, thousands of Namibian teachers, pupils and parents took part in countrywide demonstrations to oppose the government's refusal to increase teachers' salaries and benefits. The teachers are demanding that the government abides by its undertaking, approved around 19 months ago, to upgrade salaries.

The demonstrations were organised by the Namibia National Teachers' Union (NANTU) and supported by the rival Teachers' Union of Namibia (TUN). The marchers carried placards threatening to take strike action during the examination period.

The government claims that the promise to implement a universal salary structure for all teachers was "incorrect" and "erroneous" and has ordered newly recruited teachers to pay back the increase they have already received. It has also launched an investigation at the Ministry of Education and the Office of the prime minister, to find and punish whoever approved the new salary scheme.

The government insists it cannot afford to pay the increase, but the teachers reject this and point to the millions in public funds that are misappropriated through "dubious investment schemes."

Robert Hoeseb, a maths teacher at Dawid Bezuidenhout School in Khomasdal, told *New Era* (Windhoek), "We are just waiting for the green light from NANTU to strike and we will.... Teachers can simply not make a living anymore because of the low pay.... Parents of learners must understand that teachers will not be striking to spite them or their children, but for their own survival."



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