

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

30 September 2005

Europe

French dockers and sailors protest ferry privatisation

Dockers and seamen protested this week against plans to privatise the French state-owned ferry company National Corsica Mediterranean Company (SNCM). On September 26, the government announced that SNCM was likely to be taken over by Butler Capital Partners, a French investment group.

Workers opposing the takeover protested outside ferry entrances and set up barricades at France's largest seaport, Marseilles. Riot police were then mobilised and used tear gas against the workers.

On September 27, the port was brought to a standstill as dockers and seamen at the passenger port, as well as the oil and container terminals at Fos and Lavera 30 kilometres to the west, staged a 24-hour strike to protest the privatisation. The following day, police commandos used helicopters to recapture a passengerless ferry that had been commandeered by striking sailors in the Mediterranean.

It is reported that the privatisation plan includes the loss of up to 400 out of 2,400 jobs. As part of the plan the government will give SNCM €113 million (\$136 million) in recapitalisation. Butler would pay just €35 million for the company.

SNCM operates routes from France to Corsica, Tunisia and Algeria.

Insurance workers in England hold 48-hour strike

Around 2,000 Co-operative Insurance Service employees held a 48-hour strike this week to protest the imposition of new contracts. The action, which began on September 27, is the first by CIS employees in 35 years. The staff are members of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers.

More than 500 CIS staff participated in a national rally in Manchester, the city in which CIS is headquartered. On September 28, a delegation of CIS staff demonstrated outside the Co-op Bank in Brighton. The protest was planned to coincide with the nearby annual Labour Party conference, which was also lobbied by CIS workers.

CIS workers fear that the new contracts could leave them

up to 30 percent worse-off.

The company has switched the collection of premiums and payment deliveries to a central administrative staff. This task had previously taken up between 40 and 50 percent of its sales force's time. The company then instructed staff to spend the "extra time" they now had to sell more financial policies.

CIS has threatened staff with the sack if they do not sign by 17 October.

Workers at sports centre in Jersey conduct wildcat strike

Staff at the Les Quennevais sports centre in Jersey held an unofficial walkout on September 27. According to a trade union spokesman the dispute began when civil servants were asked to cover for staff during a trade union rally.

The strike resulted in swimming lessons being cancelled and the closure of the gym. Other facilities were also disrupted at the sports centre.

Middle East

Staff at Israeli hospital end strike

The staff of Josephthal Hospital in Eilat—located at the southernmost tip of Israel—went out on strike on September 21 to protest against Clalit Health Services' order to discontinue all outpatient services due to lack of funds.

The next nearest hospital providing ambulatory treatment for Eilat residents and tourists is 300 kilometres away. Josephthal is owned by Clalit, which demands that the government subsidise the hospital's functions because it is the only one in the Arava.

Eilat residents attended a mass demonstration outside the hospital September 19. Schools and municipal offices were closed to enable pupils and employees to attend.

The Health Ministry said that it is making efforts to persuade the treasury to allocate money for keeping Josephthal running.

The hospital workers ended their strike after three days when the Finance Ministry agreed to transfer NIS 11 million to the hospital as a down-payment ahead of the promised full sum of NIS 18 million.

Last week, members of 14 Clalit health maintenance

organization clinics went on strike in a show of support with the Yoseftal Hospital employees.

Israeli bank workers begin partial strike

The workforce at Bank Leumi halted telephone services September 27. The employees also plan to halt the delivery and collection of mail between the bank's branches, and they will avoid all contact with the bank management, Israel Radio reported.

Religious council workers to stop daytime burials

On September 27, the Histadrut labour federation instructed religious council workers to step up their three-day strike by halting the burial of the dead during daytime hours.

The decision to hold only nighttime burial services will affect mainly peripheral communities where the Hevre Kadisha burial society operates. In the three major cities of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa where burials are by private companies, no disruptions were expected.

Shlomo Stern, the head of Histadrut's department for religious council workers, said that the strike was declared after delay in the payment of wages of some 230 council workers in 17 communities across the country.

Africa

Striking farm workers shot in South Africa

Security guards shot and killed a striking farm worker, Ezekiel Raseleman, 31, and wounded four others, when they opened fire on protesters at Kanhym Estates in Middelburg, Mpumalanga on September 21.

Around 500 had gathered at the farming company's headquarters during a dispute over wages. The workers had been on strike for two weeks to push for an increase of 10 percent instead of the company's offer of 6.5 percent. They were also demanding 20 days paid holiday per year and a payment of R10 (US\$1.55) extra for night shifts.

In the week preceding the shootings, 120 strikers had been arrested while travelling to the picket line at the company premises. They were only released on payment of R500 bail (US\$77.50) per detainee.

Teachers on strike in Congo—journalists suspended for report

Two radio journalists in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have been suspended indefinitely on the orders of provincial governor, Hubert Molisho.

According to *Journaliste En Danger* (Kinshasa), Luckson Kabala, was accused of "inciting revolt" because he read a press release over the radio that had been issued by the Union Federation of the Eastern Province calling on public employees in Kisangani to strike in solidarity with teachers in the capital, Kinshasa. Kabala insists that his programme director had agreed to the statement being read.

Action was also taken against his colleague, Mayumba

Mayiribu, because on September 15 he commented on air that the government was "irresponsible" for not respecting the commitments it had made to the teachers.

The teachers are on strike to demand adherence to the pay scale agreed with the government after negotiations in February 2004. The strike is affecting many private schools.

Strike of South African airline cabin staff

Following a 98 percent vote in favour of industrial action, cabin staff at South Africa's Nationwide Airline went on strike for three days from September 23. Jaco Kleynhans, spokesperson for the Solidarity union, said that the strike was well supported, with between 70 and 90 percent of Solidarity's members taking part in some cities.

The action was in support of the demand for a 5 percent salary increase plus a 3 percent pensionable contribution from the employer.

The airline has threatened to take legal action against Solidarity to seek damages for defamation, because the union cautioned passengers to make alternative travel arrangements over the weekend in case the airline was grounded by the strike.

Sit-in at Egypt's Nubariya Engineering & Agricultural Automation Company

Six hundred workers at the Nubariya Engineering and Agricultural Automation Company have been occupying the company's headquarters since September 3 after all the worker members of the shareholders' board of directors, as well as other employees, were dismissed. Nubariya is an affiliate of the Agriculture Ministry and workers have owned 20 percent of the shares since the company was privatised in 1997.

On September 26, the workers demonstrated outside the Alexandria Governorate in protest against what they claim are the "arbitrary and unfair measures and the serious violations committed by the company's board of directors."



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