

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

21 October 2005

## Europe

### Italian arts workers oppose budget cuts

On October 15, staff at cinemas and theatres across Italy held a one-day strike to protest government plans to cut arts budgets. The government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi plans to cut the arts budget from €464 million to €300 million as part of €11.5 billion in budget cuts.

The cuts are wide ranging and, according to the film industry association Anica, will threaten 5,000 companies and put 60,000 jobs at risk. It is feared that two thirds of Italian arts companies, including theatre and music institutions, will not be able to make it through the year due to the cuts. Many renowned artistic events such as the Venice Film Festival face ruin as a result.

Trade unions, including the FISTEL-CISL, SLC-CGIL and Uilcom-Uil, organised the day of action. Staff struck at a number of arts institutions, including the La Scala in Milan where a performance of Rossini's "The Barber of Seville" was cancelled.

The industrial action also delayed the start of actor and director Roberto Benigni's new film, *The Tiger and the Snow*. Benigni supported the strike, stating, "The opening of my film is a party ruined not by the strike but by the cuts. The strike is absolutely right."

### French oil refinery hit by strike

Oil refinery workers continued their strike this week at the Gonfreville-L'Orcher plant near Le Havre. The workers are striking against Total SA, the largest French refinery. The members of the CGT trade union are demanding pay parity with other staff. Management has stated that it will only consider certain individual pay rises.

On October 17, the strike entered its 28th day and the workers voted to extend it by a week.

The strike only involves 70 of the 1,600 workers at the refinery, but as it is in a key division it has shut down the entire plant. The Gonfreville-L'Orcher

refinery is one of six Total refineries in France and is the country's largest, with a capacity of 343,000 barrels a day.

### First Bus drivers in Midlands, England continue dispute

Bus drivers employed by First Bus in north Staffordshire and south Cheshire continued their dispute this week by holding a second strike over pay on October 14. The action hit bus services in several towns and cities, including Crewe, Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Up to 300 members of the Transport and General Workers' Union are involved. The second strike began following the failure of talks between First Bus, the TGWU and the conciliation service ACAS. The union said that First Bus had offered a pay increase, but that it was tied to giving back additional payments that would cost its members £35 per week. The TGWU said the company had also refused to incorporate back pay into any agreement. Drivers are paid just £6.60 an hour.

## Africa

### Civil servants on strike in Central African Republic

For the second time in two weeks, workers employed by the government in the Central African Republic (CAR) have taken strike action to demand payment of nine months' salary arrears. The strike began on October 19 and is expected to last for eight days. A strike last week went on for three days.

The workers have a number of other longstanding demands, particularly the lifting of a salary freeze imposed in 1995.

On October 14, the government paid just one month of back wages. The UN Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) web site quoted a driver, Pierre Renga, who said, "We are asking the government to satisfy our demands so that our children can go back to school."

### Angolan airline workers launch 24-hour strike

Technical navigation personnel employed by TAAG, the Angolan state-owned airline, launched a 24-hour strike on October 17. They are demanding the implementation of a retirement scheme that offers a better chance of regular payments than that provided by the National Institute of Social Security (INSS). The INSS pension is under-funded and the workers view it as lacking credibility.

The flight staff had agreed to continue paying into the INSS scheme if it were to be supplemented by a TAAG subsidy equivalent to 80 percent of their net salary. Management has rejected this proposal.

### **Cargo personnel on strike in Ghana**

Cargo personnel were on strike at Ghana's international airport in Accra on October 17, affecting both inbound and outbound flights.

Cargo handlers hired out by a company called Aviance are demanding a 60 percent pay increase, compared to a management offer of 25 percent. They called the strike after negotiations failed to produce any result. The workers are also demanding payment of allowances owed to them.

The strike has brought the handling of cargo to a standstill. Kenya Airways, Virgin Nigeria and Lufthansa were all affected. Large numbers of police were drafted in to intimidate the strikers at the gates of the airport. This is the second time this year that employees of Aviance have gone on strike to win a pay increase.



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