

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

17 February 2006

Europe

Public workers in Germany expand strike

Public sector workers in Germany widened their strike this week as an estimated 20,000 local and regional authority staff, including kindergarten teachers, university hospital staff, street cleaners, nurses and cooks, joined the industrial action on February 13.

The stoppages are being carried out to protest plans to extend weekly working hours by 90 minutes, from 38.5 to 40 hours a week, with no increase in pay. Workers fear that local and regional authorities will use the longer hours to cut as many as 250,000 jobs in the public sector and related administrative branches.

Some 40,000 workers struck in total, according to the trade union Verdi, which represents 2.4 million workers in the public sector. The strike is the largest public sector industrial action in the country for 14 years. Originally beginning in the southern state of Baden-Wuerttemberg, it now involves workers in 10 of Germany's 16 regions, including Lower Saxony, Bavaria, Saarland and Schleswig-Holstein.

Swissmetal strikers demonstrate against plant closure

On February 11, more than 10,000 people demonstrated in support of strikers at the Swissmetal factory in Reconvilier, northwestern Switzerland. The workers are striking against plans to close the Reconvilier foundry, with the possible loss of 120 jobs. Those attending the demonstration came from all over the Jura region, and included strikers, their families, union representatives and local politicians.

Swissmetal announced last November that the foundry site was to close and that it would concentrate its activities at another site, Dornach. According to the plans, the Reconvilier plant would then exclusively concentrate on manufacturing premium wires and rods.

At the rally, the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions representative Jean-Claude Rennwald called on the

strike's mediator, national and local authorities, the private sector, and the unions to help find a solution to the dispute.

The company announced last week that it would implement an "accelerated headcount reduction" of 120 jobs over the next two to three months. Originally, the company had said that 40 jobs were to be lost under the plans announced in November. A staff of 350 are employed at the Reconvilier facility.

On February 13, Swissmetal sacked 21 senior members of the management team when they failed to turn up for work due to their participation in the strike.

Teaching assistants in Cheshire, England, strike in pay dispute

On February 15, teaching assistants at more than a dozen schools, including units for special needs children, in Cheshire took strike action in a dispute over pay. Eight schools closed, and special needs units were disrupted at a further 13 schools.

The industrial action began following a vote by 1,400 members of the public services union Unison. The staff voted to reject the introduction of new pay grades by Cheshire County Council. As part of the action, staff lobbied councillors as they met at County Hall in Chester for a budget meeting.

The union claims that under the new pay grades, staff have to perform new duties for the same or worse pay and that in some cases would be as much as £2,000 worse off.

Unison spokeswoman Linda Hands said, "Given that these staff generally earn less than £15,000, it is not surprising that 77 percent of teaching assistants and 65 percent of the administrative staff have voted to strike."

Africa

Transnet dispute brings Cape Town, South Africa, to a halt

Rail transport in Cape Town was halted on February 15 as employees of Transnet walked out over the privatisation and break up of the countrywide system.

The strikes are being held in protest at the lack of consultation regarding the reorganisation of the South African transport industry.

The Western Cape regional secretary of the SA Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu), Evan Abrahamse, was quoted in the South African-based *Business Report* as saying that only four trains arrived at Cape Town station on the morning of the strike. He also said that cargo had been brought to a halt in Cape Town harbour.

Rail services in the Northern Cape also stopped running on February 15.

A February 5 article in the *Business Report* accused the unions involved of having an ulterior motive for the strike. The article said that the unions would be more able to buy up parts of the businesses being sold off by Transnet if the sale were delayed as a result of the strike.

Liberian rubber workers' strike spreads

A strike by rubber workers is taking place at Liberia's biggest plantation, the million-acre plantation at Harbel (near the capital Monrovia) owned by Bridgestone/Firestone. Some 6,000 workers are on strike to demand better pay and conditions. The strike began on February 3, when about 200 workers walked out, but has since widened and now includes 4,000 tappers—who tap the trees for their latex sap—as well as 2,000 administrative and domestic staff.

One of the strikers, 57-year-old Lawrence Tamba, who lives in a mud hut with no water or electricity, said, "We are living in the plantation beyond human imagination.... Most of the housing units us tappers live in are dilapidated." According to the workers, each one is required to tap 650 trees per day in return for \$3.38. Many tappers have to rely on their children to help them meet the quotas.

Liberian human rights groups, together with the US-based International Labour Rights Fund (ILRF), filed a lawsuit in the United States against Bridgestone/Firestone, claiming that "thousands of workers, including minors, toil in virtual slavery at Bridgestone/Firestone rubber plantation in Liberia."

Junior Fayiah, 12 years old, said, "Every morning at six I wake up and without eating enough go straight to the rubber plantation to tap latex with my father. I tote the latex bucket on my head every day. Right now, as I speak to you, my neck hurts."

"I have six children and they were all born here in the plantation," another worker explained. "I wanted them to be educated, but there is no proper schooling for them, and four of my children [including a seven-year-old] are forced to help me tap latex every day."

An article entitled "Firestone Strike Ended, Or Did It?," published by *Tire Review* on February 10, points out that articles claiming the strike is over are contradicted by others. Some reports say that the strike is not only continuing, but hardening, with angry union members taking over the offices of the Firestone Agriculture Workers Union of Liberia (FAWUL) and holding a meeting to change the union leadership. Another report refers to striking workers asking for recently elected President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf to intervene.

Fishery observers go on strike in Namibia

Some 215 fishery observers in Walvis Bay and Luederitz, Namibia, went on strike in February to demand the introduction of a salary structure, a bonus payment, and other improvements in their pay and conditions.

The strike was ended on February 14, after an agreement was signed that met some of the workers' demands. However, according to an article of February 15 in the *Namibian* (based in the capital, Windhoek), the main issue of the salary structure has been left in the hands of an "independent human resources consultant" who intends to submit a report by the end of April.

The agreement ending the strike was reached in Windhoek at a meeting between the Ministries of Fisheries and Labour, the Fisheries Observer Agency, and the Namibia Public Workers Union.



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