

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

10 February 2006

Europe

Paris air traffic controllers launch sympathy strike

On February 7, French air traffic controllers at Orly airport in Paris took wildcat strike action. The workers walked off the job in support of the nationwide day of protests against the First Employment Contract (CPE). The CPE allows employers to hire workers aged under 26 and to fire them in the first two years with no legal penalty.

The controllers were also protesting the breakdown in negotiations with the civil aviation authority DGAC over the implementation of a compulsory minimum service at the airport during strikes.

The action was held from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m. and then again from noon to at least 2.00 p.m., leading to the cancellation of most French domestic and European flights. Orly was shut down for most of the day.

Public sector workers demonstrate in Lisbon

Up to 20,000 public sector workers demonstrated in Lisbon, Portugal on February 4 to protest government benefits cuts and to demand better pay. The demonstration was organised by the Common Front trade union and was the third such protest called since Prime Minister Jose Socrates' Socialist Party (PSOE) government took office in March.

As part of its spending cuts, the government is proposing a 1.5 percent increase in public sector wages for 2006, below the expected inflation rate of 2.3 percent. It has also introduced a promotions freeze for state workers, reduced civil servant sick pay to 65 percent from 100 percent of salary and raised the retirement age to 65 from 60 years.

The government's overall spending deficit was estimated to be more than 6 percent of gross domestic product last year, well above a European Union limit of 3 percent.

Coca-Cola workers in Croatia strike

On February 2, up to 250 workers employed by Coca-

Cola in Zagreb, Croatia staged industrial action in a dispute over pay and severance for those laid off from their jobs. Strikers blocked entries to warehouses and halted production and distribution at the plant following the breakdown in talks between Coca-Cola Beverages management and Marijan Sokacic, the head of the trade union labour union.

The company attempted to ban the strike by claiming that it had started before being announced, as required by law. Workers are demanding a 10 percent increase in wages, which are currently about 3,000 kuna (\$490) a month. The employees are also calling on the company to grant a better severance deal to 123 laid-off workers, mainly drivers.

Africa

Liberian rubber workers strike

More than 3,000 employees of Firestone Rubber Corporation in Liberia have been on strike for five days in a dispute that began when 200 workers walked out on February 3. The *Analyst*, a Monrovia-based publication, described the strikers as "angry, discontented, desperate, and obsessed with [the] raw quest for better working conditions, better education for their children, health, and increased wages."

According to the paper the workers have decades-long grievances, but the issue that precipitated the strike was the fact that Firestone had "withheld and/or denied" the repayment of 37.5 percent of earnings deducted from their pay since 1992.

Other outstanding issues are bad housing, the lack of provision of secondary education for the children of plantation workers and the fact that Firestone has increased the workload of each tapper by more than 50 percent, from 400 trees per day to 650.

The Liberian government is very concerned about the situation and sent a group of ministers, including Labour Minister Kofi Woods, to attend a meeting at which the strikers could put forward their demands.

One of the tappers told the officials, "We are

underpaid; our rights have been violated and nobody has heard our voices.... Our parents were not educated. They bore us here; we too are not educated and we are tappers today. So Firestone wants our children to stop in the 9th grade and become tappers too."

Woods told the strikers he would relay their grievances to the country's president and asked them to call off the action.

Firestone has been sued in a US Court by human rights activists who are seeking compensation for around 14,000 people who are said to be living in conditions of slavery on the Firestone rubber plantations.

Health workers in South Africa hold sit-ins over non-payment

Around 4,000 health workers in Eastern Cape, South Africa held sit-ins on February 2 to protest against non-payment of salaries. Their problems have gone on for several months, since the payment of stipends was transferred from the Health Department to the Small Projects Foundation (SPF). The most recent problem occurred in December. Some workers received payslips informing them of payments that had never been made.

One of the affected workers, Nomathemba Matiwane, told the *Daily Dispatch* that not receiving the money had been a disaster for her family: "I have five children and I can't pay their school fees." Another worker, father of two Zongezile Mambinja, said, "We have become liars to our families and neighbours. Last month my child wanted school shoes—I promised to buy them for her.... Now she thinks I'm a liar."

The authorities claim that some payments could not be made because of problems of getting the attendance registers, which workers have to sign every day, from the 748 clinics in the province back to headquarters in East London. However, a spokesperson for the health care workers claimed that some districts had not even received the registers.

South African contract workers strike

Seven hundred fifty South African contract workers employed by the building company Fluor South Africa took strike action last week on several issues, from back pay on allowances to an hourly rate increase and safety in the workplace. The action has delayed the construction of a new petro-chemical plant for Sasol, in Secunda, Mpumalanga.

According to the South African Broadcasting

Corporation, the workers have instituted a grievance process against Fluor SA to press their demands. Management has engaged labour specialists in an attempt to resolve the impasse.

South African social workers threaten to strike

Hundreds of social workers in South Africa marched to the premier's office on February 3 to demand back pay owed to them. They threatened to strike if their demands were not met within three days. Social workers from Mzimkulu, Dordrecht, Queenstown and other areas in the east of the country supported the demonstration.

Last December both Premier Nosimo Balindlela and Thoko Xasa, MEC for social development, admitted that the 469 social workers were owed back pay by the government, but according to the *Dispatch* absolutely nothing has happened since then.



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