

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

21 April 2006

## Europe

### **Peugeot announces plant closure in Coventry, England**

Auto manufacturer Peugeot announced April 18 that it is to close its car plant at Ryton near Coventry, England with the loss of 2,300 jobs. The plant produces the Peugeot 206 model and the company stated that its production will cease in the middle of 2007.

Peugeot announced that the 206 model will continue to be produced at a plant north of Paris, France.

The announcement follows the decision last year by MG Rover to close its plant at the nearby Longbridge plant in Birmingham, with the loss of nearly 6,000 jobs. The company said that it was closing the plant following the results of a study showing that Ryton had high production and logistical costs and was therefore unable to justify future investment.

Peugeot Communications director John Goodman said that despite substantial productivity improvements, “Unfortunately that just doesn’t change the economics of the situation because the situation is that Ryton is the most expensive manufacturing plant in Europe. He added that every car produced there cost €415 (£286) more than anywhere else in Europe.

The firm plans to halt production in two phases—moving to a single shift in July 2006, and then halting production completely in mid-2007.

Trade unions at the plant immediately condemned the decision as an attack, not on workers’ jobs and livelihoods, but on British manufacturing. Derek Simpson, general secretary of Amicus, said: “It is inconceivable that workers in France would be laid off on this scale.”

Tony Woodley, the general secretary of the Transport and General Workers’ Union, described the news as “another nail in the coffin of the UK car industry.”

The unions have been careful to play down any talk of industrial action to fight the decision. Des Quinn of the

TGWU said, “We are looking initially at a social and political campaign, which might involve disruption to car sales or Peugeot’s operations. The message to the board in France is that it’s not going to be a walkover and to think again.”

### **Newspaper staff strike at *France Soir***

Employees at the newspaper *France Soir* began strike action on April 14 following an announcement that the publication would be handed over to a group whose restructuring plan would cut staff levels in half.

The group, Brunois, said the takeover plan would entail cutting staff levels to 51 from the current 112.

The decision was announced by the Tribunal of Commerce in Lille, which has been arbitrating the bankruptcy since October and has favoured the bid led by real estate developer, Jean- Pierre Brunois.

The trade unions stated their preference for the company to be taken over by Russian tycoon Arkadi Gaydamak. Gaydamak owns the *Moscow News* and is being sought for extradition by Israeli authorities on charges of money laundering. He is also wanted by French authorities on charges of tax evasion and illegal arms dealing with Angola.

The unions supported the bid by Gaydamak on the pretext that he promised no job losses. A Confédération Générale du Travail spokesman said, “We are angry because the tribunal chose the worst possible solution. This is the bid that intends to lay off the largest number of employees and gives the least future for the newspaper.”

### **Greek refuse workers suspend industrial action**

On April 15, refuse workers in Greece suspended their one-day industrial action following an agreement between trade unions and the government to resume negotiations.

The nationwide strike led to more than 50,000 tons of refuse being piled up in the greater Athens area, with about 9,000 tons in other city centre areas. Local authorities have said that it would take at least three days to collect the accumulated rubbish.

The stoppage began as part of a campaign by refuse workers to win pay increases and other benefits. They want their job designated as “unhealthy and physically demanding,” which would allow early retirement.

### **Lighter crews at Harwich port in England vote to strike**

On April 15, lighter crews that take out pilots to the large container and cruise ships coming into the port of Harwich voted for strike action in a pay dispute. The crews were offered a 2.7 percent pay increase by port management, but are demanding 4.25 percent. No date has yet been set for industrial action by the Transport and General Workers’ Union.

### **Middle East**

#### **Iranian protests against living conditions**

Despite a ban on strikes, the number of workers protesting poor economic conditions in Iran is increasing.

Angered by unpaid wages and low pay, workers in the northern Iranian provincial capital Rasht blocked streets and protested in front of government offices at the beginning of April. Many banners read: “We are hungry!”

The protesters were joined by dam workers in the western province of Elam and employees of a pharmaceutical factory in Tehran. Recently, workers have also gone on strike against harsh working conditions and impending layoffs in mines and petrochemical plants across the country, with hundreds of coal miners from the northern province of Gilan protesting not being paid for up to 13 months. Workers were also on strike in the car factories of the Iran-Khodro company. This was the site of a massive work stoppage on last year’s Day of Social Welfare and Securities (July 16), when strikers demanded the introduction of a minimum wage.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad promised an improvement in wages and living standards when he took office in August 2005, but the country’s economic difficulties persist despite annual oil revenues of about \$50 billion.

Over 50 percent of the Iranian population continues to live under the poverty line, according to official estimates by the Iranian Central Bank. The government institution sets the poverty line at an income of €230 (\$280) per month for a family of five.

The current strike wave was initiated by Tehran bus drivers in January, whose action was brutally suppressed by the government.

#### **Foreign workers rounded up in Qatar**

English language web site *The Peninsula* reported that last week around 1,000 foreign workers were rounded up

by Qatar police following their protests at the death of two construction workers, one Nepalese and one Egyptian. The workers are housed in a labour camp at Ras Laffan and apparently died in their sleep.

The protest was sparked when an ambulance came to collect the bodies from a mortuary at the camp. Workers fought with camp bosses and police and then the army was called in.

The Nepalese ambassador to Qatar visited the camp and spoke to company officials and to the workers. He is said to have discussed medical provision for the workers and the quality of food provided.

### **Africa**

#### **South African Telkom lockout**

Ten thousand striking workers belonging to the Communications Workers Union (CWU) have been locked out by the fixed line telecommunications operator Telkom. They are in dispute over bonus payments.

Telkom has offered workers on the lowest pay a bonus of 10,000 rand, but the union demand is for 50,000 and that all employees get an equal share. It wants an 8.5 percent rise for the lowest paid workers and 7.5 percent for supervisors. The company has offered 6.2 percent. Last year the company made a profit of 6.8 billion rand and its executive board 33.5 million rand.

Two other unions, Solidarity and the South African Communication Union, have accepted the company offer.

#### **Nigerian steel strike**

Workers covered by three unions in the private sector of the Nigerian steel industry began a two-day strike on April 19 in response to the ending of gratuity payments to retiring workers.

Kazeem Kadiri, general secretary of the Steel and Engineering Workers Union of Nigeria (SEWUN), said the strike had been called to get the employers to agree to negotiate.



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