Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

16 June 2006

Europe

Finance workers in Oslo protest strike ban

Finance workers in Oslo, Norway, demonstrated on June 12 to protest a government decision to ban a strike due to start that day. Demonstrating outside the Royal Castle, the workers were also protesting a lockout threatened by their employers—the banks and insurers.

The workers are campaigning to defend their pension rights as Norwegian insurance employers seek to cut the cost and benefits of their pension scheme. The dispute involves some 24,000 employees, and a strike would virtually shut down the Norwegian financial industry.

The government has appointed a seven-member arbitration committee to enforce a settlement in the dispute. Labour Minister Bjarne Haakon Hanssen said a special session of parliament would enact the legislation needed to force the parties into mediation.

On June 10, talks between Finansforbundet and the employers' federation failed to reach agreement. The government then intervened in the dispute as the first national banking strike in 30 years was threatened.

Norwegian broadcasting journalists return to work after one-week strike

On June 8, around 1,500 journalists for Norwegian Broadcasting (NRK) ended their weeklong strike and returned to work. They had struck to demand higher pay. Management at NRK have agreed a pay increase of 14,000 kroner (about US$2,300) plus an extra day of vacation. The staff had begun the strike action after protesting that their salaries were far below those at private-sector media outlets.

Rail signalling workers in Britain vote to strike in pay dispute

Rail signalling workers employed by Network Rail in Britain are set to strike following a vote in favour of industrial action. The staff, members of the Rail and Maritime union (RMT), voted by more than two to one to reject a pay deal that they said would amount to a two-year pay freeze.

The 3,000 workers are to stage two one-day strikes across Britain at 1300 BST on June 20 and again at 2100 BST on June 25. The initial strike is timed to coincide with England's final World Cup group game against Sweden, as tens of thousands of football fans will be trying to get home to watch the game.

Ordnance Survey workers in the UK vote to strike

Workers employed by Ordnance Survey, the UK's main mapmaker, have voted this week by a majority of four to one for industrial action. The workers at Ordnance, including cartographers, surveyors, marketing and sales personnel, designers and IT engineers, are protesting the failure of management to implement a pay agreement 10 months after it was signed.

In a ballot turnout of 71 percent, nearly 80 percent of the Prospect trade union's 1,000 members at Ordnance voted to strike, while nearly 83 percent supported action "short of a strike." This action will begin on June 19 at Ordnance Survey sites across the country. It will involve staff working strictly to their agreed hours and a ban on unpaid overtime.

Were the strike to proceed, it would be the first time workers have taken industrial action at Ordnance Survey in the 200 years since the founding of the organisation.

Middle East

Protesting migrant workers in United Arab Emirates take manager hostage

On June 10 in Dubai, 319 Chinese construction workers at Gohchong Co., the subcontractors of Al Nakheel's main contractor Simcorb, went on strike when they learnt that the company was planning to deport some of their colleagues for "unruly behaviour"—a reference to their stopping work in protest at the non-payment of wages.

According to sources, towards nightfall the workers broke into the office of the manager of the construction company, Yon Dock, a Singaporean, and took him hostage along with his deputy. He was, however, released

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after dues were paid to the striking workers.

The Chinese ambassador was also at the site trying to negotiate with the workers. But they said that they had paid US$4,000 each to the recruitment company back home for a two-year contract and would face great problems if they returned home.

When the workers had initially refused to release the hostages, anti-riot police rushed to the site and surrounded the location. The police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse the protesters. Around 1 a.m. on June 11, the riot team claimed the hostages and arrested eight workers.

Lieutenant Riyad Shafie from the Dubai Human Rights Department told the *Khaleej Times* that the company manager had refused to press criminal charges against the striking workers, opting instead to refer them to the Permanent Labour Committee. The workers who instigated the trouble will be probably deported, said Shafie.

Africa

General strike in Guinea

Most of Guinea's capital, Conakry, was brought to a halt from June 8 onwards, due to an indefinite general strike called to oppose deteriorating living standards. The prices of fuel and the staple food, rice, have dramatically increased, and wages have lost their value with inflation running at 30 percent. A 50-kilogram sack of rice now costs more than US$25—more than half a civil servant's monthly wage.

This current strike action follows a one-week-long general strike in February. The government has recently removed subsidies that had kept down the prices of basic goods in an attempt to meet the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), despite Guinea being one of the world's poorest countries.

Police fired tear gas and plastic bullets at hundreds of student demonstrators on June 12 who were demanding that the government either resign or lower the prices of fuel and rice. On the morning of June 13, police again attacked young demonstrators, who responded by throwing stones. Barricades were put up to block the streets. At least 10 students are reported to have been killed by police.

Around 12,000 teachers are involved in the general strike, and this means that students are unable to take their final exams for their diplomas. However, the majority of students are blaming the government for increasing prices and causing the strike.

Namibian gold miners strike over conditions

Gold miners at the AngloGold Ashanti mine in Navachab, Namibia, went out on strike for at least two shifts, in opposition to poor working conditions and managers who are allegedly arrogant and racist. They are demanding the dismissal of two of the managers in particular.

The mine employs about 264 workers, and they have to commute in from nearby Usakos. They say that the current transport allowance of N$340 (US$51) is not enough and must be increased.

Nigerian telecom workers reject government offer on pay arrears

Nigerian telecom workers in the National Association of Telecommunications Employees (NATE) have rejected a government offer of N1.7 billion (US$13.8 million) made on June 13. They condemned the arrest of four of their members and pledged to continue with strike action.

In rejecting the offer, NATE said that Nigeria Telecommunications Ltd. (NITEL) employees were owed a total of N4.276 billion (US$34.7 million), more than two and a half times the amount offered. NATE was formed by ex-members of the National Union of Post and Telecommunications Employees (NUPTE) and the Senior Staff Association of Utilities, Statutory Corporations and Government Companies (SSAUSCGOC) after they lost confidence in the old unions' ability to redress the issue of non-payment. Acting president of the new group, Charles Amankwe, said that while his members appreciated the federal government's efforts to bail the recently privatised NITEL out of its predicament, the union was in no hurry to accept half-measures.

Ghanaian health workers begin strike action

Staff employed by the Ghana Health Service have begun indefinite strike action over the government's failure to implement a new pay structure agreed to in January of this year. The staff include nurses, pharmacists, administrators and clerical workers. They will join junior doctors who have been on strike in a similar dispute for the last four weeks.

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