

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

23 June 2006

## Europe

### Portuguese GM workers strike to protest factory closure

General Motors workers in Azambuja, Portugal staged a 24-hour strike June 16 to protest the expected closure of an Opel plant currently employing 1,150 people.

The employees have demanded payment of salaries due until 2009 if GM goes ahead with the closure. GM has reportedly informed the workers that the plant will be shut down by the end of this year. An official announcement has been postponed, possibly until the end of July, after an appeal by Prime Minister Jose Socrates.

Reports said GM wants to move the factory to Zaragoza, Spain, where logistical and other costs would be lower, reducing the cost of production by €500 (US\$600) per vehicle.

### Staff at major UK supermarket chain to walk out

Thousands of workers at Asda have voted in favour of strike action after a long dispute with the supermarket group over pay and bargaining rights.

The dispute involves 12,500 workers at 20 Asda distribution centres across the UK, who work as lorry drivers, warehouse pickers and produce loaders. If industrial action goes ahead, it would shut down most distribution at the supermarket chain.

The GMB union, which represents about 40 percent of the workers at the centres, said almost three quarters of those who voted backed a walkout. The ballot is linked to the GMB's dispute with Asda over the company's refusal to allow it to negotiate nationally for its staff at all Asda depots. Asda, which is owned by US supermarket giant Wal-Mart, has long resisted union rights in its home operations. It says that local collective bargaining takes place at 9 of its 24 UK depots.

There is also a dispute over profit-related bonus pay.

After the ballot announcement, GMB General Secretary Paul Kenny said, "GMB members tell us that the company is gearing up and may illegally attempt to use agency labour to do our members' jobs.

"Using agency labour during an official trade dispute is illegal and GMB will not allow Asda/Wal-Mart to run a coach and horses through UK labour law."

Asda said it had calculated the number of its staff who are union members using data supplied by the GMB and evidence from its own payrolls. It claims to have unearthed 100 examples where former Asda employees have received ballot papers. It also says that 60 employees who have left the union have been balloted.

A GMB spokesman said it was possible that some of the people who have been balloted no longer work for Asda. He blamed the chain for not supplying the information it is to required to by law. "Our lawyers believe after three months-worth of work on this ballot, they have organised a lawful, legal ballot, and any problem we have in establishing the precise details of some of our members at Asda lies wholly with the company." He added: "We have formally complained to the Department of Trade about Asda's activities and have asked for rulings on whether their actions are lawful. If they are lawful they

should be made unlawful."

GMB stewards privately predict a 4 to 1 vote in favour of a strike.

### Iberia pilots announce strike

Iberia pilots have called a seven-day strike during July as a protest against the company's plan to create a new low-cost airline. The strike is expected to take place July 10-16.

Sepla, the main union representing Iberia pilots, says the action comes after negotiations failed with Iberia management regarding the company's new Barcelona-based airline, Catair. A spokesman described it as a "strike for survival." Iberia has a majority share in Catair, which has been created with four other partners.

### German university clinic doctors end strike, while new one looms

After a three-month healthcare workers' strike, university clinics in North Rhine-Westphalia resumed normal business June 19. However, doctors at municipal hospitals are threatening to walk out.

The Marburger Bund, Germany's biggest doctors' union, will decide on June 26 about the convening of a vote that could lead to 70,000 physicians going on strike at municipal hospitals in Germany.

Discussions between the Marburger Bund and state negotiators over salaries and working conditions ended on June 9 after the two sides failed to come to an agreement.

Meanwhile, doctors are back to work at North Rhine-Westphalia university clinics following a June 16 agreement over pay increases and working conditions for 22,000 physicians nationwide. The Marburger Bund union said the deal for the first time creates special salary conditions for doctors at academic institutions and claimed it will especially benefit younger physicians.

Doctors' salaries will rise to €43,200 (US\$54,400) in their first year of work and €45,600 in the second. Further details were not available. East German doctors expressed disappointment that wage agreements for East German physicians were significantly lower: €38,000 in the first year and €40,800 in the second.

Despite strikes, doctors ensured that emergency care has been available. Tens of thousands of doctors at university hospitals and psychiatric clinics in most of the country have staged regular walkouts that affected all but emergency services.

In addition to low pay, doctors had been protesting against long working hours of up to 80 hours per week.

## Africa

### Tea pickers on strike in Kenya

Tens of thousands of tea workers and pickers went on strike in Kenya on June 16, after the government rescinded a ban on the use of tea plucking machines. Fourteen multinational-owned tea factories in the Nandi district of Kenya were forced to stop production as a result of the strike.

The strikers mainly belong to the Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union (KPAWU). Its deputy secretary-general, Francis Waweru, claimed that the strike had 100 percent support in Limuru,

Sotik, Nandi Hills and parts of Nakuru and 70 percent support in Kericho. He added, “All workers in the tea industry should heed the call to down their tools because we’re fighting for the jobs of over 80,000 Kenyans that are at stake.”

The union has called for the sacking of Labour Minister Newton Kulundu and of Labour Permanent Secretary Nancy Kirui, who had, without consultation, announced the decision of the government “with immediate effect” to lift the ban on the use of the machines

#### **Zambian Game Store workers strike against casualisation and low pay**

Zambian workers at Game Stores walked out on strike June 19 in protest against the prevalence of temporary contracts and low pay at the retailer. They are demanding substantial salary increments and better conditions of service.

According to a report in the Lusaka-based newspaper the *Post*, while the workers expect a pay rise of 30 to 38 percent, management are offering only 7 percent. Strikers complained that “the situation is pathetic because some of us have been working as casual workers for seven years or so and we have never been put on permanent basis yet.”

The workers are also angered by the high profit margins being made on the games. They said investors had taken advantage of unemployment levels in the country to exploit workers. “In fact we are aware that from the profits made in Zambia, Game Stores has opened bigger investments in Angola, Mauritius and other countries.”

#### **Rail workers hold cross-border strike in Mali and Senegal**

A joint strike by rail workers in Mali and Senegal was held on June 14-15 to demand a pay rise. The Malian union—the National Workers’ Union of Mali (UNTM—*Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Mali*)—is calling for the honouring of the agreement signed on December 17, 2004.

The Malian daily *L’Essor* reported the anger of the strikers stems from Transrail director François Lemieux’s refusal to recognise the new leadership of the UNTM, elected at an “extraordinary congress” of the union, held on April 28-29 and funded by the workers themselves. The workers claim that Lemieux was trampling on the principle of trade union freedom by continuing to recognise the former leader, Abdoulaye Berthé, who was voted out and replaced by Abdoulaye Sago.

The paper reported that the union central offices support the new leadership. Yaya Mallé, education advisor to the UNTM, argues that the new executive is legitimate and legal. He said, “The former officers want payments and the cost of maintaining them in office comes with the blessing of management. This extraordinary congress was organised by workers themselves who funded it from their own subscriptions because they believe that the former officers led by Berthé had too many shortcomings in managing the union’s problems.”

UNTM says that the management have treated them with contempt, refusing to hold any negotiations with them.

#### **Striking Nigerian telecommunications workers defy union call to suspend strike**

The strike of employees at the Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL), which began in early June, was suspended last week. The action had been called to demand payment of unpaid salaries and allowances since the beginning of the year.

The suspension of the action was announced by Bala Ibrahim Abdulkadir, deputy general manager, corporate communications of NITEL. In doing so he warned that “although it was agreed that no

disciplinary action shall be taken against any staff for participating in the strike, this does not cover staff who do not report to work after the call-off of the strike.”

However, according to *Vanguard* (Lagos), the chairman of the National Association of Telecommunication Employees (NATE), Charles Amankwe, dismissed the suspension, saying that the groups that signed the suspension of the strike, including the National Union of Post and Telecommunications Employees, NUPTE, and Senior Staff Association of Utilities, Statutory Corporations and Government Companies, SSAUSCGOC, had already been the subject of a vote of no confidence passed by the strikers. Amankwe rejected the suspension, insisting that NITEL workers had lost confidence in the leadership of NUPTE and SSAUSCGOC to genuinely press for their welfare, and therefore any agreements reached through them were not binding.

Banks, hotels and many communications companies have been affected by the strike. On June 2, strikers turned off the power supply to the Private Telecom Operators House, preventing Nigerian telecom companies from interconnecting. International telecommunications have also been affected.

#### **Strike of South African security guards continues**

South African security guards belonging to the South African Transport and Allied Workers’ Union (SATAWU) have been on strike for 11 weeks. The dispute began after 14 other unions signed a deal on April 1 with the employers’ organisation for an increase of 8.3 percent. SATAWU declared the settlement to be totally inadequate and demanded 11 percent.

Following negotiations brokered by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), SATAWU is now urging its members to accept a revised offer by employers, including a three-year wage deal of a 9.25 percent increase in the first year and 7.25 percent in the second and third years. The lowest-paid grade—Grade E in area five—would be phased out and moved to area four, which would mean, in effect, an raise of 19.89 percent for the lowest-paid workers.

It is claimed that other disputed areas, including maternity benefit, overtime allowances, meal intervals, study leave, long-service benefits and night-shift allowance, have also been addressed.

However, there was no immediate agreement to end the dispute, which has seen violent attacks on the strikers by the police. On June 16, a memorandum was handed to the ANC government demanding that “the office of President Mbeki should stop criticising us and stop protecting capital and telling us we are criminals. The minister of labour has failed us and we want him to be removed with immediate effect.”



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