

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

14 July 2006

Europe

Demonstrations in Hungary to protest government austerity measures

On July 8, thousands of protesters demonstrated in Budapest, Hungary against the “New Balance” austerity measures being imposed by the government. The protest was called by a coalition of six trade unions in opposition to a fiscal programme agreed between the ruling Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Free Democrats (SZDSZ).

Under the measures the government plans to reduce the budget deficit from 8 percent to 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2008, to facilitate Hungary joining the euro zone in 2010 or 2011. In order to facilitate this, the new legislation includes a number of tax increases and austerity measures. The unions say that in addition to a possible 12,000 job losses the fiscal package will incur a 0.5 percent rise in employees’ social insurance contributions; a 2 percent rise in health insurance payments from September and another 1 percent rise next January; a 10 percent hike in taxes imposed on allowances “in kind”; and a 30 percent rise in gas bills and a 10-14 percent hike in electricity prices.

Iberian airlines pilots return to work

Pilots employed by Iberia airlines returned to work on July 13. They had begun strike action on July 10 to oppose threatened job losses relating to the company’s plans to establish a low-cost carrier, Catair, which is to be based in Barcelona and is scheduled to be launched in October. The unions said that management had been unable to guarantee the new carrier would not lead to job losses or cuts in wages.

On the first day of the action, Iberia was forced to cancel 251 mainly domestic flights and several international flights. More than 200 flights were also cancelled on July 11 and 12. The dispute was called off on Thursday after management pledged to protect existing jobs and wages.

Signal workers in the UK set to strike in pay dispute

Thousands of railway signal workers in England are set to strike for 24 hours on July 21 in a dispute over pay. The action by members of the Rail Maritime and Transport Union will bring the UK’s railway network to a halt.

The signal workers are employed by Network Rail, which is attempting to impose a 21-month agreement on the staff. The company announced that it had now made a final offer to the trade union and it was the “end of the line for negotiations.” The terms of this offer have already been rejected by the membership of the RMT in a ballot.

The general secretary of the RMT, Bob Crow, said that the union was still willing to negotiate a settlement, and added, “Network Rail has just agreed a one-year deal for over 15,000 infrastructure workers but is refusing to give 5,000 signallers the same—that does not make sense. The company is fixated with a 21-month deal but all it has to do is apply the figures in the offer relating to the first year and it will be acceptable to the union.”

Africa

Ugandan production workers strike

Workers at the Crestank factory in Uganda walked out on a two-day strike action at the beginning of July in protest over working conditions. The factory employs 120 workers who produce moulded plastic products, such as water pipes.

The *Monitor* quoted Apollo Kawalya, the leader of the 73 striking production workers, who said that there was no work safety in the plant. He explained, “We are working in a very hot environment that needs to have drinking water on a regular basis.... They stopped giving us clean drinking water and the salary comes late. We eat at an unhygienic canteen next to a stinking toilet. They have been promising bonus to all but instead, it’s given to a few selected ones and the

method used is not clear.”

According to the workers, two of their colleagues were hospitalised after being burnt in an accident at the factory, but the management had offered them no financial help.

A return to work followed the intervention of one of the company directors based in Nairobi. According to Kawalya, the company had promised a salary increase from July 26, but the company has not given details of the amount.

Ugandan teachers' strike

Teachers in Manjiya County in the Manafwa district of Uganda have been on a sit-down strike for over three weeks in support of their demand for the payment of salary arrears for April, May and June.

A spokesman for the Manafwa district has recently claimed that the authority has received the funding to clear the teachers' salaries. But the strikers have declared their determination to remain on strike until they are paid.

Chadian Esso workers strike against discrimination on pay

Over 400 workers at Esso Mobil's Chad oil facility, a subsidiary of Houston-based Exxon Mobil, went on a three-day strike on July 5, in a pay dispute. The workers had sought a 25 percent pay rise but had been offered a 7.5 percent increase.

Total oil production in Chad is about 160,000 barrels of oil per day, which makes up a significant part of the country's foreign exchange earnings. According to *IRIN*, the workers have warned that they will extend their strike action if their demands are not met.

Indefinite strike called at the University of Ibadan

Academic and non-academic workers at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, took indefinite strike action from July 11 against what they described as the “obnoxious imposition of high payee tax on all the categories of workers in the institution by the Oyo State government.” According to *Vanguard* (Lagos), the strike was supported by all the unions on campus, including the Academic Staff Union of Universities, the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities and the Non-Academic Staff Union.

In a joint letter to the university authorities the unions claimed that all attempts at negotiation since May 2005 had not yielded positive results.

The action has meant that all new registrations have

ceased and that all departments, including libraries and offices, are locked.

Three Gambian transport union officials detained for three days

On July 11, the *Gambia Journal* (Banjul) reported an attempt by officials from the National Intelligence Agency to preempt a rumored taxi drivers' strike by arresting three officials of the Gambia Transport Union. The union's president Ebou Faal, his deputy Sait Ceesay and treasurer Bakary Saho were picked up in the late afternoon of July 5 and were not released until Friday, July 7. All three have denied engaging in any plans to stage a strike of taxi drivers.

Police arrest protesters at Namibian grape firm

On July 6, 12 employees at the Grape Valley Management Company at Aussenkehr, Namibia, were arrested on charges of public violence, instigation and intimidating other workers. No bail was granted and they will remain in custody until the case is heard on July 26.

They were part of the group of 164 workers who had recently been made redundant. According to reports, the redundant workers had blocked the office entrances in protest against the job losses and unsatisfactory redundancy packages. After five days the demonstrators left the premises on the understanding that there would be a review of the redundancy terms. The blockade was renewed on July 3 because of the failure of the management and union to reach a satisfactory agreement.



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