

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

21 July 2006

## Europe

### Taxi drivers in Italy resume protests

Taxi drivers throughout Italy continued their wildcat strike action this week in protest against government plans to deregulate the industry. The plans enable private firms to enter the sector by acquiring licences and hiring their own drivers, inevitably leading to many existing taxi drivers losing their livelihoods amid increased competition.

Earlier protests over the plans were ended following an agreement by the government to hold talks with drivers' trade unions. But earlier this week the government announced it would not withdraw its proposals. Civil Service Minister Luigi Nicolais said, "The drivers will have to get used to the idea (of deregulation) because the government is not going to do a U-turn."

This sparked further strikes, which left taxi ranks in Rome deserted at the airport and main train station; while in Milan, Turin and Bologna drivers were only responding to emergency calls from the sick and elderly. On July 17, thousands of drivers demonstrated in Rome at the historic Circus Maximus area of the city. The drivers parked their cars there before proceeding to march into the centre of the city.

### Staff strike at food distribution plant in Wales

On July 14, 300 staff at the Iceland frozen food distribution centre in Flintshire, Wales, staged strike action for 24 hours to protest plans by the company to close the facility and move the work to Cheshire.

The company decided to relocate after failing to agree to restructuring plans with the union at the plant, which is to be closed at the end of September. The industrial action is to be followed by a work to rule.

### Strike continues at hospital in Sofia, Bulgaria

Doctors, nurses and medical workers continued their protest at the Pirogov emergency hospital in Sofia,

Bulgaria against the reduction of salary levels that have been in place since the beginning of the year. On July 17 the medical staff protested the measures and the workers have threatened to increase the duration of industrial action by an additional hour each day.

This week doctors requested a 50 percent increase in wages starting July 1 and new labour contracts. They claim that their wages have decreased by nearly 30 percent since the beginning of 2006.

### Driving test examiners strike in the UK

Driving test examiners in England struck July 13 to oppose restructuring plans by the Driving Standards Agency (DSA). Nearly 2,000 examiners and other staff participated in the stoppage at hundreds of test centres, disrupting learner drivers scheduled to take their driving tests. According to DSA figures, about a third of tests were cancelled during the day.

The staff are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCSU) who say that the restructuring will lead to cutbacks in London, Birmingham and Edinburgh. The DSA has denied that 80 jobs are to go due to the proposed closure of customer service centres.

## Middle East

### Unprecedented strike action at 25 Egyptian newspapers

Twenty-five daily and weekly independent and opposition papers have gone on strike to protest the Egyptian government's new press law, which stipulates custodial sentences for publishing offences. The strike action included the independent weekly *Sawt Al-Umma*, the weekly *Al-Osbou*, and the independent daily *Al-Masri Al-Yom*. The leading independent paper *Al-Dostour*, however, did not join the strike. According to *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, the action is unprecedented in Egypt's 130-year-old press history.

The press threatened similar action in 1995, when parliament passed Law 93 stipulating tough prison

sentences for publishing offences. At that time, the government backed down and repealed the law. But according to *Al-Ahram*, its replacement, passed in 1996, also included jail sentences for certain offences, though the terms specified were shorter. On July 16, as parliament prepared to approve the draft bill in the face of press opposition, President Hosni Mubarak intervened to have the most controversial article in the law dropped. However, a large number of other controversial provisions remain that criminalize investigative journalists and leave them subject to imprisonment.

## **Africa**

### **Thousands of coal processing workers on strike in South Africa**

Approximately 2,000 workers at the Sasol coal-to-liquid Secunda plant, east of Johannesburg in South Africa, are out on strike after rejecting the company's offer of a 6.5 percent wage increase plus a 1.5 percent increase in housing subsidy. The company processes coal to produce up to 160,000 barrels of fuel per day.

The strike began in the early morning of July 17, with 1,500 strikers demonstrating outside the gates of the plant.

The union Solidarity represents around 5,000 of the 12,000 workers at Secunda. Initially the union leadership recommended that the offer be accepted. However, a spokesman for the union has accepted that the strike will continue until the issues behind it are resolved.

Wage talks are also taking place at other major oil companies, including British Petroleum, Royal Dutch Shell, Engen, a subsidiary of Malaysia's Petronas, and state-owned PetroSA.

### **Mauritian government employees take strike action**

Employees at the Mauritius Revenue Authority (MRA) have taken strike action in protest against a new work schedule. An offer of a 10 percent wage increase in exchange for an extra half hour's work every day was rejected by the vast majority of employees at the Ministry of Finance. Of the 248 employed at the ministry, only 87 accepted the offer. *L'Express* reported that the workers are holding out for a better salary increase and the restoration of former working hours.

The action is likely to hold up the payment of salaries and the dispatch of tax returns forms that should be sent

out to all taxpayers in the next few weeks.

### **Zambian council employees demand back pay**

Council workers have gone on strike throughout Zambia to demand payments of salary arrears. The only council areas not involved in the action are those in Ndola, Chililabombwe, Kitwe, Mufulira and Kalulushi.

Information minister, Vernon Mwaanga, has denied that the government is responsible for the non-payment of salaries. He insists that the issue is between the councils, the Local Government Association of Zambia and the workers, and claims that it is the sole responsibility of the local councils to raise money and meet obligations to their workers.

### **Doctors in Zimbabwe refuse to end strike action**

Junior doctors stationed at Parirenyatwa and Harare hospitals took all-out industrial action on July 11 in support of their demand for "substantial loans to buy vehicles suitable for the rural terrain and competitive salaries and allowances commensurate with their work." They have defied a government instruction to return to work while their grievances are investigated. The two hospitals involved are dealing with emergency cases only.

The dispute is connected with the conditions confronting doctors when they work in the rural communities. One doctor commented, "We want to be able to have cars so that we can drive back and forth if there is need and the cars should be suitable for the rural terrain if the hospitals are in rural areas." He added, "We should have a competitive salary as well as decent accommodation. How can they expect us to board buses with our patients?"

According to the *Herald*, the government has offered the doctors furnished accommodation, complete with a bed, stove, television and a Fortec Star decoder as well as a district allowance if they agreed to go to the rural districts. But the doctors insist that it is insufficient.



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