

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

4 August 2006

## Europe

### **Iberia airline ground staff strike at Barcelona airport**

Some 2,500 ground staff employed by Iberia at Barcelona's El Prat airport took unofficial industrial action on July 28 to protest the airport authority's decision to withdraw management of passenger ground services from the airline.

The stoppage resulted in the cancellation of nearly 600 flights at the airport during a peak period of the holiday season. Nearly 100,000 passengers were affected by the stoppage. Barcelona airport is the second busiest in Spain.

The action was condemned as illegal by the government. A judge at the Barcelona provincial court opened a case against the ground workers and accused them of endangering security at the airport and kidnapping as several planes with their passengers on board were detained for hours during the strike.

According to trade union leader Manuel Garcia Biel, unions and Iberia had reached an agreement in principle under which ground crews for Iberia will continue to do the airline's handling work in Barcelona.

### **UK Revenue and Customs staff in industrial action over possible job losses**

Around 8,000 Revenue and Customs staff took 24-hour strike action on July 31. The workers are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) and are protesting the possible loss of 12,000 jobs.

The staff deal with tax claims and are based in offices at Glasgow, Newcastle, Salford, Liverpool, Wrexham, Cardiff, Portsmouth, Leicester, Bradford and Edinburgh.

The PCS had previously reached an interim agreement with management and postponed an earlier strike. The latest industrial action was authorised after the union said that management reneged on that agreement.

### **Vehicle handlers in the UK strike in pay dispute**

Vehicle handlers in the UK employed by the French-owned firm STVA staged 24-hour strike action on August 2 in a dispute over pay. The 35 workers are members of the Transport and General Workers' Union based at sites in Scotland, Birmingham and Oxford.

The workers are responsible for moving vehicles off train and truck transporters to compounds for onward journeys in the UK and overseas. The handlers are campaigning for a pay increase of £22 a week. They presently earn £278 for a 39-hour week.

The strike began following a breakdown in negotiations between the trade union and management. Further action could be called in the run-up to the new car registrations period in September. Auto manufacturers that would be affected include Jaguar, Ford, Peugeot, Citroën and Honda.

### **London Underground cleaners demand improved contract and pay**

Cleaners employed on the London Underground began industrial action this week, staging pickets outside the headquarters of the subway companies Metronet and Tube Lines Ltd. on August 2 and 3.

The workers are members of the Transport and General Workers' Union and are in dispute over pay, terms and conditions. The workers submitted a new pay claim in June.

A majority of the workers are paid between £5.05 and £6.16 an hour, and many do not receive holiday and sick pay, or pensions. They often have to work extra hours to be able to afford to live in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

### **Cheese makers in Northern Ireland take industrial action**

On July 28, about 200 cheese factory workers employed by Glanbia PLC in Magheralin County Armagh, Northern Ireland, took strike action in a dispute over pay.

A company offer of a 3 percent increase was

overwhelmingly rejected by workers in a ballot. The Transport and General Workers' Union claims the workers had lost between £2,000 and £5,000 in overtime earnings over the past 12 months due to the company employing agency labour.

## **Africa**

### **Liberian rubber workers strike after killing of unarmed man**

Workers at the Cocopa Rubber Plantation in Liberia are on indefinite strike after a member of the local community was shot and killed. The workers say the weapon used to kill him was a single-barrelled rifle, a weapon used by the company's security guards.

According to an article in the *Inquirer* newspaper, the victim, Stanley Dahn, was walking from the village to the plantation at the time he was shot, and the guards may have mistakenly thought he was a thief. His body had bullet wounds to the head, and his legs had been broken. The strikers are demanding an investigation into the killing and the punishment of those responsible.

### **South African cleaners strike**

South African cleaners began strike action on August 1. They are demanding a 12 percent increase for urban and 15 percent for rural workers. Currently, the minimum pay for urban cleaners is R8.57 per hour (US\$1.25) and for rural workers R6.87 per hour (US\$1). The cleaners are also demanding an annual bonus equivalent to one month's pay and full contribution to the provident fund by the employers.

Protest meetings took place in Johannesburg and Pretoria to launch the strike, with an attendance of 4,000 and 3,000 workers respectively.

More than 20,000 workers are involved in the dispute, and they are represented by 16 different unions. The largest union involved is the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (SATAWU), which represents about 15,000 cleaners. The Hotel, Liquor, Catering, Commercial and Allied Workers' Union represents around 6,000.

The employers' offer of a 6 percent pay increase has been rejected by the unions. One of the cleaning companies affected, Supercare Cleaning and Hygiene Services, South Africa's second largest, has an annual turnover of R450 million (US\$64.8 million). The employers are due to meet with the unions again this week.

### **South African iron ore workers on strike over pay**

Around 6,000 iron ore workers at Anglo American's Kumba Resources Ltd. in South Africa have been on strike since June 30 in a dispute over pay. The company has a total workforce of about 10,000.

The three unions involved, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the Building Allied Mining Construction Workers' Union (Bamcwu) and Solidarity, are demanding a pay increase of 9 percent for higher grades and 10.5 percent for lower grades, while management is offering between 7 and 8 percent. Although the headline inflation rate is 4.8 percent, housing costs have gone up more than 25 percent. The pay of the company's CEO, Con Fauconnier, increased by 35 percent last year, and the disparity has angered the workforce.

The strike has stopped work at three of the company's plants, including the country's biggest iron ore mine. Kumba is the fourth-biggest iron ore producer in the world, and Africa's biggest.

### **Workers protest at Export Processing Zone, Kenya**

More than 1,000 young workers protested at the Rising Sun Company of the Athi River Export Processing Zone, near to Nairobi, Kenya. The workers were laid off a month ago and were demonstrating over non-payment of their terminal benefits. They prevented workers from entering the factory and blocked the nearby Nairobi-Namanga highway with rocks and bonfires. Police responded by throwing tear gas canisters and arrested several of the demonstrators.

The Export Processing Zones Authority has ordered the indefinite closure of the company because of "persistent labour disputes." The Zone contains about 18 companies employing a total of around 12,000 workers.



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