Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

1 September 2006

South West Trains drivers in England strike in ongoing dispute

On August 29, train drivers employed by South West Trains (SWT) began a 24-hour stoppage, leading to severe disruptions on some of the busiest routes into London.

Some 900 staff, members of the drivers union Aslef, participated in the action. The dispute began earlier this year and is centred on a conflict involving Waterloo-based drivers over the use of taxis to and from work.

SWT operates 1,700 services a day from London to many towns and cities in the south of England, including Windsor, Reading, Guildford, Plymouth, Weymouth, Bournemouth, Southampton, Portsmouth and Brighton. It transports a total of 400,000 passengers a day. SWT advised passengers not to travel during the strike due to services being halted on many routes. Other routes were operating at just 10 percent capacity. Only 300 trains ran instead of the usual 1,700 during the day.

During the strike, Aslef accused the company of endangering public safety by using managers to drive trains. It alleged that one of the management drivers had not driven a train for 10 years. The union said that it planned further strikes on September 8 and 11 pending resolution of the dispute.

In a separate dispute, train drivers on the Heathrow Express from Paddington in London to Heathrow Airport also struck on the same day.

Royal Mail sorting staff strike in Exeter, England

Mail sorting staff at the Royal Mail's Exeter Mail Centre in England walked off the job in unofficial strike action on August 29. The stoppage involves 300 workers in support of a trade union official who is involved in a dispute with management over his sick leave entitlement. Staff allege that the Royal Mail has not followed agreed disciplinary procedures in the case of the official.

The industrial action resulted in mail being "severely disrupted," according to the Royal Mail. The Exeter facility is a major sorting centre and processes an estimated 1.2 million letters and parcels every day. It is expected that the strike will lead to delays in the delivery and collection of mail to tens of thousands of addresses in Plymouth, Exeter and the county of Cornwall.

The strike began when Royal Mail drivers at the centre refused to go out on collection duty. It escalated when staff reporting for duty on the late shift, night shift and Wednesday's early shift also walked off the job in solidarity.

In an attempt to break the strike, Royal Mail have drafted in managers to sort mail. According to a BBC report, mail was also turned away on Tuesday by striking freight workers at Exeter airport. The workers' trade union, the Communication Workers Union, issued a statement August 30 saying that it was attempting to negotiate a return to work.

Public transport workers in Brussels strike in dispute over safety

Employees at the Brussels public transport authority MIVB-STIB began industrial action August 29 to protest a violent attack against an employee and to demand improvements in safety for staff.

The previous day a fight broke out on a bus in Ixelles/Elsene between an aggressive passenger and an MIVB-STIB driving instructor. The passenger became violent after other passengers on the bus had complained about the loud music he was playing. Following the assault the instructor lost consciousness and was taken to the hospital for treatment.

For the duration of the strike almost a quarter of all buses did not leave the depot. Trams and metro services were not affected and operated as normal.

Cologne protest against Lufthansa wage-cutting in Australia

On August 22, 15 protesters staged a demonstration outside the Cologne headquarters of the German airline

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Lufthansa to oppose plans by the company to cut wages of Global Tele Sales (GTS) call centre workers in Melbourne, Australia.

The Australian employees, members of the Australian Services Union, are involved in an ongoing campaign to demand better pay and conditions.

During the protest, demonstrators distributed several hundred leaflets and carried posters with the slogans "Lufthansa/Global tele-sales—Stop cutting wages!" "Against worldwide dumping of wages" and "Global solidarity!"

Shoprite Checkers strike continues in face of intimidation

Workers employed by the South African retail company Shoprite Checkers are continuing their national strike action, begun July 18 in pursuit of a R300 ($44) per month or 10 percent increase—whichever is greater, with a minimum wage of R2,300 ($325). The company offered a rise of R265 ($39) with a minimum wage of R1,800 ($265) in early August but this was rejected by the union representing the workers, the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (Saccawu).

Police in Western Cape have taken strong action against the strikers, with nearly 70 arrests to date. Saccawu regional secretary Crosby Booi was quoted in the *Cape Times* of 29 August: "This is the only province where striking workers are being arrested.... We are calling on the police to stop acting unnecessarily and (to abide) by their code of conduct. They mustn't take sides."

Booi also condemned the company's use of Red Ant security guards around their shops. They have a reputation for using violence and their use "is fermenting violence in the Western Cape," he said.

Strikers in KwaZulu-Natal have also faced intimidation by police and security guards. Moses Makhanya, a union spokesman quoted by SABC News Online, said the police, security guards and managers have collaborated in "intimidating and threatening our members ... but be that as it may our members are 80 percent out on strike."

Company and union representatives are continuing to meet under the auspices of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration. In the last financial year Shoprite's profits were up by about 21 percent.

Cosatu promises solidarity action in support of striking cleaners

The South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (Satawu) together with other Cosatu-affiliated unions called national one-day strike action September 1 in support of striking cleaning workers.

Cleaning workers represented by 16 unions, of which Satawu is the largest, have been taking action since the beginning of August. They are seeking a 12 percent rise for urban workers and 15 percent for rural workers. The current minimum for rural workers is R6.87 per hour ($0.97) and for urban workers R8.57 per hour ($1.21). They are amongst the lowest paid workers.

At a meeting between unions and employers on August 16 a proposal to pay cleaning workers a 13th cheque per year came to nothing as not all the employers represented agreed. Satawu union officials issued a statement following the call for mass supportive action "to put pressure on cleaning-sector employers to return to the table and negotiate working conditions in this vulnerable sector."

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