

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

15 September 2006

Europe

German steel workers strike for more pay

Workers at companies including ThyssenKrupp AG, Germany's largest steelmaker, have started a series of short strikes demanding higher wages.

Workers stopped production at two ThyssenKrupp plants in Duisburg in a "warning strike" on September 8. Employees at three other companies in the city are also on strike.

Steelworkers are demanding a greater share of companies' profits after rising demand pushed takings at ThyssenKrupp and smaller rival Salzgitter AG to record levels last year. Workers this week rejected a 3 percent pay increase, saying they want more than double that amount.

Wolfgang Nettelstroth, a spokesman for the IG Metall union, said, "IG Metall still demands an increase in salaries of 7 percent for 12 months for about 85,000 workers in North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony, and Bremen."

IG Metall has called on as many as 1,000 employees in Duisburg to stop work for a demonstration. Warning strikes will continue next week, with stoppages at Salzgitter. Such industrial action typically lasts between one and two hours and involves workers from a handful of company units.

Employers had offered to raise salaries 3 percent for 19 months and give a one-off payment of €500 (\$635) after the previous wage contract ended last week.

Workers at UK nuclear power station take strike action

Up to 40 employees of Balfour Kilpatrick working as electricians at Hunterston Nuclear Power Stations A & B struck on September 12 and 13 and will do so each consecutive Tuesday and Wednesday after that.

The contractors have taken industrial action due to the removal of a 50-pence-per-hour enhancement that was in place for 30 years.

UK firefighters strike

Six weeks ago, Merseyside firefighters overwhelmingly voted to strike against the cuts proposed by the Fire and Rescue Authority and demanded by the government.

Last week, the workers staged an initial eight-day strike. Unlike in previous disputes, there is no military cover since the Territorial Army is involved in Afghanistan and Iraq.

On September 6, a Merseyside Fire Brigades Union (FBU) press release announced that "Merseyside fire crews are taking eight more days of strike action. The fire authority has been given the statutory notice of the start of strike action from 10.00 on 12 September until 10.00 on 20 September."

The Fire Authority refused to meet FBU representatives until the day before the second eight-day strike was due to begin. They were otherwise engaged, as the FBU's latest press release made clear: "This Friday they have organised a two-hour 'Awayday' at Aintree racecourse at the expense of council taxpayers. They can make time for drinks and nibbles, but are again too busy to meet and thrash out a deal to end a fire strike.

"Merseyside fire crews are furious at the approach of the fire authority to these talks. They are behaving as if they are relishing this dispute rather than looking forward to resolving it."

Irish taxi drivers strike again

For the fourth time in recent months, taxi drivers across the Irish Republic have begun a series of one-day stoppages over new fare structures.

The strikes will affect services across the country.

The Irish Taxi Drivers Federation, National Taxi Drivers Union and SIPTU represent 14,000 of the state's 17,000 taxi drivers. Around 10,000 of those have threatened to strike next month, during the prestigious Ryder Cup golf tournament.

The unions claim the new fare system, which is due to come into effect on Ryder Cup week, will have a

devastating impact on drivers' incomes. It will introduce minimum charges set at €3.80, or €4.10 at premium times, replacing the system where fares were set by individual local authorities. It also sees the abolition of luggage charges and a €1.50 hiring charge for pick-ups from Dublin airport.

Middle East

Israeli union body threatens budget strike

The Histadrut threatened September 5 to launch a general strike if no changes are made to the 2007 budget proposed by Finance Minister Avraham Hirschson.

Histadrut Chairman Ofer Eini said, "If the Treasury does not take back its unilateral decisions or sit down in a fair manner for negotiations, we will not hesitate to close down the economy even before the [economic] arrangements bill is passed."

The budget proposed September 12 includes NIS 3.85 billion in cuts to social programs and infrastructure development that had been planned prior to the outbreak of the invasion of Lebanon.

Welfare payments frozen include those benefiting the elderly and widows, single mothers, the disabled, those injured on the job and the unemployed, in addition to child allowances, income guarantee allowances and assistance for home care.

Africa

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Threat of victimisation hangs over Kraft Foods strikers in South Africa

Over 300 striking food workers at the Kraft Foods plant in Elandsfontein, South Africa, are facing victimisation if they return to work after four months on strike.

Disciplinary hearings would be organised, which would be likely to result in the more militant workers losing their jobs and the weakening of workers' resistance. The union is demanding only that the workers should be suspended for three months rather than losing their jobs altogether.

Luvuyo Tyikwe, regional secretary for the Fawu union, was reported in the *Sowetan* of September 12 saying, "The company has indicated an intent to retrench 50 workers, and people who are retrenched are not entitled to severance pay."

He added that the union was willing to meet with Kraft to come to an agreement with them.

Kraft is seeking job cuts at the factory in line with its plan to eliminate 8,000 jobs worldwide. Kraft's parent company Altria has increased its dividends to shareholders by 7.5 percent.

Tea workers in Cameroon demonstrate over unpaid dues

In the first week of September, over 500 workers at Cameroon Tea Estates (CTE) in Tole held a demonstration outside the Southwest Delegation of Labour and Social Security in Buea.

Speaking at the demonstration, Blasius Mosoke told the *Post*, "We came here because of government's silence over the issue. Schools are resuming and we are confused on how our children would go back to school. This is the 22nd day since they called us to Yaounde and promised to pay us within two weeks. Yet it seems they deceived us."

Yet again the workers were given promises rather than payments. Divisional Official (DO) for Buea, Yves Bertrand Awoumfac, told the crowd, "The prime minister has taken upon himself to see a final solution to the matter. He told me to tell you that a team will be coming to pay your money on Friday."

Armed riot police have been patrolling the streets since September 4, in an attempt to intimidate the workers into backing down.

Nigerian teachers strike over pay arrears

Primary school teachers in Delta state, Nigeria have refused to return to work at the beginning of the new academic year, because a sum of N315 million (US \$2.56 million) in promotion arrears was never paid by the state government.

The Delta State Chairman of the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT), Jonathan Ojobu, told the *Vanguard* newspaper that promotion payments had not been paid from as far back as 2004, as well as 2005 and 2006. Also, primary school teachers had been excluded from the recent monetisation changes, so they have not had benefits such as houses converted into increased salary payments.



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