

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

22 September 2006

## Europe

### Train strikes threatened as German government pushes for privatization

German railway workers' unions have threatened to go on strike over government plans to privatise the country's rail network.

Talks between employers and unions on safeguarding jobs following the planned sell-off of Deutsche Bahn AG broke down on September 13. Norbert Hansen, head of the Transnet union, said strikes could begin as early as September 28.

The German government plans to sell off up to half of Deutsche Bahn for several billion euros.

### UK health workers to stage second national strike

Health workers across the UK are to stage a second national strike on September 26 during the Labour Party conference.

The protest, by workers from the National Health Service's Logistics agency, will follow the 24-hour walkout on September 21—the first national NHS strike for 18 years.

Around 900 staff were balloted by Unison and of the 66 percent who voted, 74 percent backed industrial action. Workers involved in the action are based at distribution centres in Alfreton, Derbyshire; Runcorn, Cheshire; Normanton, West Yorkshire; Maidstone, Kent; and Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk.

The government intends to sell the logistics network to the German firm DHL.

NHS Logistics supplies around 50,000 lines of products, including bedpans, latex gloves, syringes, bandages, medical equipment and food. Hospitals have to order equipment three days ahead and have limited space to store stockpiles.

The current logistics service is a not-for-profit organisation supplying hospitals, GP surgeries and patients. Any profits made are ploughed back into frontline health services.

### Rotterdam hit by stoppage of public transport

On September 18, bus and tram services ground to a halt in Rotterdam.

The stoppage by drivers employed by the city's public transport company RET is due to a dispute over a new wages and conditions agreement.

Buses and trams were parked on the Coolsingel in the centre of the city, leaving only two of the four lanes free for other traffic. Trams were also halted in other areas around the city. A few hundred RET drivers marched to the City Hall to put their

demands to Transport Alderman Jeannette Baljeu.

### Strike called at Italy's main airline

Unions at Alitalia SpA, Italy's biggest airline, called a four-hour strike September 18 against Italian aviation industry reorganizations.

Sult, a union representing airline and airport personnel in Italy, stopped working between 12:30 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. throughout the country, including at Rome's Fiumicino and Milan's Linate and Malpensa airports.

The government has excluded Sult from talks with other unions on the future of Alitalia, which on September 12 posted a higher than expected loss of profit. Sult's walkout is also targeted against Aeroporti di Roma SpA, the Rome airport's operating company, which plans to sell the ground-handling unit.

Alitalia Chief Executive Officer Giancarlo Cimoli has split the state-controlled company into an airline called AZ Fly and a ground-services unit called AZ Servizi.

### Portuguese nurses stage protest

Around 150 nurses at Faro Hospital staged a demonstration earlier this week to protest their anger at being offered rolling three-month contracts. The nurses say the new contract leaves them without any job security.

A large plastic shop dummy, dressed in a nurse's uniform, was hung from specially erected gallows at the hospital's entrance, whilst nurses held banners and distributed leaflets outlining their grievances.

Nursing unions say around 36,000 nurses are needed in Portugal, but the government is intending to block any further contracts. At Faro Hospital, 700 nurses are required, but there are only 550, with 150 of these working on temporary contracts.

### Strike ballot due at postal centres in southern England

Staff at two postal centres are being balloted on strike action that would disrupt services to Devon and Cornwall. Unions claim the Royal Mail is breaking new working practices implemented after recent strike action.

Staff at Exeter are also voting over possible disciplinary action against 24 workers, accused by Royal Mail of "unlawful" behaviour during the strike.

In a separate incident, Plymouth staff are being balloted over disciplinary action against a fellow worker.

An unofficial postal strike took place between August 30 and September 4, disrupting mail to 400,000 homes across Devon. Around 300 staff walked out in support of a Communication Workers Union (CWU) official involved in a dispute over sick leave.

The unofficial walkout ended after bosses offered to reinstate the official's pay and new working terms were negotiated. Unions claim Royal Mail has since gone back on elements of this agreement.

### **Ryder Cup clothing staff to strike**

Workers who produce the clothes for the prestigious European Ryder Cup golf team are set to launch industrial action in a row over pay on the day the tournament opens.

From September 22, around 130 workers at Mackinnon of Scotland will begin a work to rule and overtime ban. The workers also warned they will stage a series of strikes in the next few weeks unless the dispute is settled.

The workers, who are members of the Community trade union, voted by 85 percent in favour of action after the union accused the company, a subsidiary of Edinburgh Woollen Mill, of refusing to make a pay offer.

### **Middle East**

#### **Industrial action at Israel Electric**

On September 15, Israel Electric submitted a petition to the National Labour Court requesting a court order that would force the company's workers to end strike action and go back to working as usual. The court decided to allow the majority of the strike actions apart from those concerning the refusal to clear out the coal ash from energy production units, which could have caused the units to malfunction.

Israel Electric's employees have disconnected management's computer, telephone and electricity services. Workers have also halted the unloading of coal from Israel Electric ships and the removal of ash from power stations. They have charged that the government's recent budget measures place the future of Israel's electricity system at risk and could lead to scarcity of power supply.

#### **Series of strikes sweep Iraq**

On September 3, hundreds of health sector workers held a three-day strike in Nasiriyah city, 370 km south of Baghdad and in Umara city 370 km southeast of the capital. The workers were demanding higher wages and repayment of contagious disease compensation.

Municipality workers have also been on strike since August 30 in Al Aadhamiya (part of Baghdad) in protest at a raid by US troops on their building. The soldiers broke doors and windows and smashed the employees' desks, under the pretext of searching for guns inside the municipality.

Workers have gone on strike in the Hilla textile company demanding better wages. Several other strikes have taken place in the same area, most related to the rise in prices of goods and services.

For the second time, the workers of Processing Gas in the

South Oil Sector took industrial action over benefits. The workers decided that the agreement resolved early in the month was breached and therefore the strike will resume. Both production and processing stopped at 8 a.m. on September 11.

### **Africa**

#### **South African cleaners continue strike after talks fail**

Striking South African cleaners are continuing their strike, which began three months ago, after talks at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration broke down. The strikers are members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) and 15 other smaller unions. During negotiations, the National Contract Cleaners Association increased its offer to 7 percent, but later withdrew the offer. The unions began the strike demanding a 14 percent increase in urban areas and 17 percent in rural areas, but have since reduced their demand to 11 percent.

Around 170 SATAWU members protested outside a meeting of the Congress of South African Trade Unions at Gallagher Estate in Midrand, after discovering that casual cleaners were being employed there during the strike.

The striking cleaners have handed a memorandum of grievances to the office of Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, South Africa's deputy president.

#### **Namibian diamond workers threaten strike action**

Almost the entire diamond workforce at Namgem at Okahandja staged an angry demonstration outside the company gates on September 15. A petition was handed in to the Namdeb management, a subsidiary of Namgem.

The workers, who perform diamond polishing, presented an ultimatum threatening to strike unless their demands are met within two weeks. Their concerns include lack of sick leave for the female workers, the refusal of compassionate leave, lack of recognition of the union's shop stewards and the inadequate provisions of the Diamonds Act.

Later the demonstrators marched to the Okahandja State Hospital, where a second petition was handed in.



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