

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

9 February 2007

Europe

Hungarian nursing staff protest plans to cut state-funded hospitals

On January 25, staff employed at three hospitals serving employees of the Hungarian State Railways (MÁV) protested at the Health Ministry in Budapest against plans to close or merge them. The health ministry has proposed to close a hospital in Szolnok and another in the capital Budapest, and plans for cutbacks at a third in the capital. The government said it may also merge some of the MÁV hospitals.

Protesters threatened to take strike action and demanded that the government reverse its decision. Some of the demonstrators held placards stating, "Our fathers' money built the hospital—hands off." The hospitals had been originally built partly from funds collected by MÁV staff, and rail workers still finance the hospitals through deductions from their salaries.

On February 1, the Railway Workers' Union threatened to stage a one-day strike the following day to protest the closures. Following negotiations with the government, the union postponed the strike until February 25, pending an agreement with the health ministry.

Hungarian public sector union calls strike in pay dispute

Last week the Hungarian Federation of Civil Servants' Unions called a two-hour strike for February 21 over pay. The Federation of Civil Servants' Unions represents 800,000 public sector workers.

According to the *Budapest Times*, the union is demanding a pay increase of at least 6.75 percent. The government of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány is offering a deal worth 5.5 percent, but this includes money due from last year.

The government is currently implementing a restructuring of the welfare system, which includes the redundancies of thousands of public sector employees. The prime minister has said that the government expects real wages to fall by as much as 4 percent this year as a result of the reforms.

Hungary has the largest budget deficit in the European Union, at around 10 percent. To meet the criteria for the adoption of the euro currency by 2009, the deficit has to be cut to 3 percent. The leader of the Federation of Civil

Servants' Unions, Endre Szabó, stated that the organisation accepted the government's need to restructure the public sector, but that it would not cooperate with it until a wage deal was reached.

Mental health staff stage industrial action in Manchester

Mental health workers in Manchester, England, took strike action on January 31 and February 7 to protest cuts in community mental health teams. Some 250 staff struck following a ballot showing 91.6 percent in favour of action. The workers are members of the Unison trade union and picketed sites in Manchester city centre, Chorlton, Crumpsall and Harpurhey during the action.

Community nurses, occupational therapists and team secretaries took part. The cuts being implemented by the Manchester Mental Health & Social Care Trust include a reduction in staffing numbers in community mental health teams and a reduction in services. The trust is also carrying out a job freeze on all nursing posts, which will result in 33 fewer nursing posts and 8 fewer occupational therapists posts. Workers also fear compulsory redundancies and possible privatisation of four community teams. The trust also plans the closure of one of the south Manchester old-age day centres and the day support team.

Workers at manufacturing plant in Ayrshire, Scotland, occupy plant

On February 2, workers sacked by the Simclar Group electronics manufacturing firm in Ayrshire, Scotland, held a sit-in at their former factory to demand better redundancy terms. During a protest outside the plant in the town of Kilwinning, the BBC reported that up to 60 workers ran inside to occupy the plant. The following day, the 20 workers who had remained in the factory overnight ended their protest.

Up to 100 staff also protested outside the company's factory in Irvine. On February 7, about 60 former workers began picketing the company headquarters in Pitreavie Business Park, Dunfermline.

Simclar announced the closure of two of its Ayrshire plants, in Irvine and Kilwinning, on January 29 with the loss of 420 jobs. The company has facilities in Europe, the US, Mexico and China and employs about 1,800 people

worldwide.

According to the Community trade union Scottish regional secretary Willie Paterson, workers in Kilwinning had turned up to find the factory gates padlocked. The staff in Irvine were escorted to the canteen, told that they were being made redundant and then escorted off the premises. The firm have yet to pay any of the staff any redundancy money.

The company cited the loss of large contracts, increasing competition and an increase in the cost of raw materials as key factors in its decision to close the plants. A spokesman said last week, "These losses—combined with competition from low-cost economies, rising raw materials costs and high-fixed costs—meant the financial liabilities in Ayrshire were such that Simclar Group could not sustain them any longer."

The Community trade union has refused to oppose the plant closures, or to mobilise staff at the Dunfermline plant—which employs 300 workers—in defence of their co-workers. It has instead orchestrated a campaign based solely on demands that the company pay out redundancy money.

Alcatel-Lucent workers in France set to strike to protest job losses

Workers employed by the IT firm Alcatel-Lucent in France are to strike on February 15 to protest restructuring and up to 15,000-20,000 job losses.

Alcatel-Lucent is the world's second-largest supplier of telecom network and mobile equipment after Cisco Systems Inc. It was formed in December last year from a merger of the French group Alcatel with the US firm Lucent. At the same time, it announced that up to 9,000 jobs would be lost.

This week, the *l'Expansion* magazine announced that up to 20,000 jobs could go. Of these, it said that 1,500 to 2,000 would be in France and 500 would be through early retirement.

According to Alain Hurstel, head of the European works council for Alcatel-Lucent, management said that the figure of 15,000 to 20,000 was "fantasy." Hurstel added, "We understand that there will be more than 9,000 jobs cut, but certainly not in the range mentioned. If that were true, it would be a catastrophe for the group."

In January, the company announced it planned to implement cost savings of at least €600 million (US\$775.6 million) for 2007. This figure was €200 million higher than it had originally announced, which some analysts said could imply more job cuts than initially planned.

Management is set to hold talks with the works councils and trade union representatives on February 13, 14 and 16 to discuss the job cuts.

Africa

Sierra Leonean airline workers strike, picket airline office

Workers employed by Sierra National Airline (SNA) have gone on strike from January 5 to demand that their rights be respected as the company moves into liquidation. Some of the workers from SNA have been transferred to the Sierra Leone Airport Authority (SLAA).

Workers held up placards reading, "We don't want any liquidation, we want our benefits, this office will be closed until the government hears our plea." The shop steward at SNA, Samuel Turay, is quoted by the *Concord Times* (Freetown) saying, "Up till now the auditor's report from the auditor general's office on the company's financial status has been kept under the carpet."

South African platinum miners continue to strike

Around 3,000 miners at the Modikwa platinum mine in Limpopo, South Africa, are continuing their strike in opposition to their employers' attempt to introduce continuous operation (conops). The strike, which has brought both mining and ore processing to a halt, began January 26.

Conops would mean being forced to work 7 days a week without a break and having to work extra shifts. The mine would operate every day of the year other than 12 days of public holidays.

National Union of Mineworkers Modikwa representative Onis Serothwane has called for a compromise with management in which 11 days would be worked every fortnight. Meetings between management and the union are taking place under the auspices of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration.

Striking nurses sacked in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

The Department of health in KwaZulu-Natal sacked about 728 nurses on Friday for taking part in a 10-day illegal strike. They had demanded the payment of rural and scarce skills allowances backdated to July 2003.

Leon Mbangwa, the provincial health department spokesperson, said the nurses' unions were not supporting the strike as the nurses' grievances were being dealt with by the Public Services Central Bargaining Council. The nurses had been "misled" by a KwaZulu-Natal nurses' committee, he claimed. "We cannot continue to employ and pay workers who have shown no compassion and commitment to principle of Batho Pele [The South African Government's slogan of putting people first]," said Mr. Mbangwa.



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