

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

23 February 2007

Europe

France: Louvre museum attendants strike to demand bonus payments

Gallery attendants at the Louvre museum in Paris staged a partial strike on February 14 to demand an extra bonus payment related to the added stress caused by dealing with the tens of thousands people who daily visit the Mona Lisa painting. The museum attracted 8.3 million visitors last year, with about 7 million of these just there to see the famous painting by Leonardo Da Vinci.

The strike was organised by the Solidaires Unitaires Démocratiques trade union. During the preceding week, union members put up stickers with a picture of Mona Lisa and the words: “My caretakers have had enough. Give them their due—150 euros!”

A trade union official said of the dispute, “We have to play the policeman all the time. It is exhausting and frustrating. The visitors are sometimes aggressive because they cannot have their photo and spend time enjoying the painting.”

The union said that some staff at the Musée d’Orsay, Versailles Palace and other French galleries and museums were also striking to protest their working conditions and recent staff reductions.

Louvre management stated that the dispute only involved 5 percent of the museum’s 1,100 attendants.

Russian sailors continue barricade of ship in pay dispute

Twenty Russian sailors barricaded themselves in their cabins this week in an ongoing protest over the non-payment of wages and the hours they are forced to work. On February 21, the sailors spent a second night aboard the Merchant Brilliant, anchored off Heysham on the Lancashire coast, in the northwest of England.

The sailors allege that they are owed £86,516 (US\$167,000). The ship is owned by a Latvian-based firm, ADG Shipping, and was detained at Dublin in December of last year over the disputed wages owed to

the crew.

The company were also forced to pay €127,971 in back wages last November to the crew of Merchant Brilliant’s sister vessel, the Merchant Bravery. Merchant Bravery was detained by port authorities at Belfast for seven days during that dispute. The sailors are currently negotiating with ADG Shipping regarding the pay dispute, and the International Transport Workers’ Federation are also involved in the talks.

One of the ITF inspectors said that if the dispute were not resolved shortly, the crew were likely to submit a petition to have the ship arrested, which would mean the ship would sail back to port. Papers would then be served on the vessel, and it would be impounded pending a court settlement.

England: Parking attendants strike in dispute over trade union recognition

Some 70 parking enforcement staff employed by National Car Parks (NCP) in Enfield, England, staged a second day of strike action on February 17. The strike is part of a series of five 24-hour stoppages. The first strike was held on February 14.

The attendants are protesting the NCP’s refusal to recognise the GMB trade union for bargaining on pay and conditions. This despite the fact that more than 80 percent of the workforce are members of the GMB. During the day of action, the attendants set up a stall in Enfield town centre to publicise the dispute.

London Underground staff vote to strike in contract dispute

On February 19, several thousand workers employed by London Underground (LU) voted for industrial action in a dispute over pay. The employees are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport trade union (RMT) and have voted to reject a 4 percent pay increase and three subsequent annual inflation-linked pay settlements. The deal also has a number of strings attached, including an element of performance-related pay termed the Customer Satisfaction Bonus scheme.

Under this scheme, staff will be offered £250 or £500 if they meet or exceed various targets. The company also wants the union to sign an agreement that the Underground can be run half an hour later on Friday and Saturday nights from May.

The union reported that its members voted 2,271 to 705 in favour of industrial action on a turnout of almost 50 percent. The RMT has alleged that the LU has failed to pay the first 4 percent pay rise, which was due last April in a deal initially agreed nearly one year ago.

The offer has already been accepted by two other unions—the Transport Salaried Staffs Association and the British Transport Operators’ Guild. The drivers’ trade union Aslef has agreed to put the offer to their members and is to recommend that it be accepted.

Rail staff at Network Rail in Scotland vote for industrial action

On February 21, signalling workers employed by Network Rail in Scotland voted for industrial action. The rail staff, members of the Rail, Maritime & Transport Workers union (RMT), voted by a majority of more than two to one to take strike action on a turnout of 63 percent.

The dispute centres on a number of issues, including the implementation of a 35-hour-week agreement and rostering agreements. Workers are also opposed to management carrying out the testing of a new computer-based assessment of staff called Cognisco.

RMT members fear the new system will be used to discipline staff and that signallers who are not at ease with using computers will be at a disadvantage. The RMT said the implementation of Cognisco was despite a previous commitment by management that it would not do so.

Africa

South African platinum miners return to work

Around 15,000 miners employed by the world’s second-largest platinum producer—Implats of South Africa—have now returned to work after a short but bitter strike. The strike began on Friday, January 16, and was over by the following Monday. Seven pickets were arrested at the Rustenburg mine last Friday, and several others were injured.

Implats had declared the strike illegal, claiming that the miners had not followed the procedures laid down in the national labour laws.

According to Lesiba Seshoka, spokesman for the

National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), one of the main grievances behind the dispute was the company’s treatment of those suffering from HIV/AIDS. Some workers who had the disease were not receiving antiretroviral treatment. One doctor in particular was said to have “no respect for patients at the hospital,” and the NUM had called for him to be dismissed. The strike was called off after Implats agreed to suspend the doctor. Seshoka said the workers were “willing to engage with management to sort out a number of issues.”

Implats’s headline profits have recently doubled, due to rises in the price of platinum.

South African university staff on strike over pay

Staff at the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa, took strike action on February 19 to demand a better pay increase than that currently being offered by management—4 percent plus 1.5 percent based on productivity. The UCT Employees Union said that the measurement of performance was not working, so the 5.5 percent should be applied to all members of staff.

Bus workers strike in Johannesburg

A strike over the issue of sick leave has stopped buses running in Johannesburg since the end of January. Dumisani Langa, a South Africa Municipal Workers’ Union (Samwu) spokesperson, said that workers had been told they stood to lose sick leave accumulated over 15 years if it was not taken within 30 days. The leave was accumulated under the public service that has been taken over by the corporation Metrobus.

A driver who continued working was shot and killed this week, and the company said it was “gathering facts” to see if the killing was related to the strike. Langa denied any union connection with the event and said that the union was meeting with Metrobus and representatives from the city of Johannesburg “to try and put an end to the strike.”



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