

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

20 April 2007

Europe

Deutsche Telekom AG strike in Germany to protest restructuring plan

On April 16, up to 12,000 Deutsche Telekom AG workers took industrial action to protest the company's plan to transfer 50,000 employees into separate units by July. The workers are members of the Verdi trade union.

Deutsche Telekom is currently involved in a fourth round of talks with the trade union regarding the transfer. As part of its restructuring the company also intends to lower the wages of some of those transferred to other units.

The strike is the third in a fortnight. Deutsche Telekom is facing increased competition in the German domestic telecoms market and has seen its market share fall drastically. It employs around 160,000 staff in Germany.

Opel workers in Antwerp Belgium strike against job losses

Autoworkers at the General Motors-owned Opel plant in Antwerp, Belgium began industrial action on April 17 after news that the plant would not be selected to build the new Astra model. Up to 1,400 jobs are to be shed as a result.

The strike began when workers were informed of the news by the unions during a late shift. The information was also passed to the morning shift the following day, which also struck in support of their co-workers.

GM is eliminating tens of thousands of jobs worldwide, including more than 30,000 in North America. The company, which is complaining that labour costs are too high at the Belgium plant, is looking to move production to Germany and eastern Europe.

Autoworkers at Belgian sub-contractors reject trade union-management agreement

This week striking autoworkers employed at the SLM car manufacturer in Gent, Belgium refused to vote on an agreement made by the FGTB and CSC trade unions in a dispute over pay. Some 120 of the 200 employees on strike at SLM, a sub-contractor of Ford, refused to participate in the vote. The workers stated that the wage deal accepted by the union was not satisfactory.

The strike began on Monday afternoon as staff protested increases in production rates at the plant. The action quickly brought production at Ford's main plant to a standstill.

Workers employed by subcontractor, Lear Corporation, also rejected the agreement and refused to vote for it.

Skoda workers strike in Czech Republic

Skoda workers in the Czech Republic walked out for several hours on Tuesday, cutting the daily production of 2,500 cars by about a third. A threatened strike on Thursday was averted when the company—a unit of Volkswagen—reached a wage deal with the union. Skoda agreed, in a deal valid until the end of 2008, that wages would rise by 10 percent immediately, but overall wages including various benefits would grow by 12.7 percent during the same period.

The strike was watched closely by western European auto companies who have shifted production from Germany, France and other higher wage countries to the Czech Republic and other parts of Eastern Europe in order to exploit cheaper labour. According to Reuters, the average wage for manual workers is 22,000 crowns, 10 percent above the national average but a fraction of wages at Volkswagen's plants in Germany.

Skoda's management has said that big pay hikes would put into question further investments at Skoda, a Stalinist-era state firm turned into a successful exporter under Volkswagen, which bought it in 1991.

Workers in southern Spain protest closure of car parts plant

Up to 300,000 Spanish workers in 14 southern municipalities participated in a strike on April 18 to protest the decision by US-owned Delphi to close a car parts plant in Puerto Real in the Cadiz province with the loss of 1,600 jobs. An additional 2,000 jobs will be affected in related industry.

Staff at the Delphi plant has staged strikes and protests against the closure for the last month including blocking the entrance to the plant with a barricade.

Swedish building workers strike in dispute over new contract

Some 800 Swedish construction workers began strike action on April 18 following the breakdown of talks over a new collective bargaining agreement, including a deal on working hours and pay.

The workers are employed by the Peab construction

company and walked off the job at 46 building sites nationally. The construction workers are members of the 128,000-member Swedish Building Workers Union. The union said this week that it would expand the strike to involve 1,500 more workers at construction companies Skanska, NCC and JM if it was not able to strike a deal with the employers' organisation.

Portuguese trade union federation calls general strike

The General Confederation of Portuguese Workers, the country's largest trade union federation, called a strike this week to protest the government's economic and social policies. The union has more than 800,000 members. The national strike is set to go ahead on May 30.

The Socialist Party government is introducing legislation weakening the job protection rights of employees and making it easier for companies to hire and fire workers. It is also increasing taxes and attacking health and retirement benefits as it attempts to reduce the budget deficit.

Last month, more than 100,000 people demonstrated against the government reforms.

Africa

Thirty-eight nurses sacked in KwaZulu-Natal for going on strike

The KwaZulu-Natal health department has confirmed the firing of 38 nurses in the South African province, who participated in a 10-day strike in February 2007 despite a labour tribunal recommending that they keep their jobs.

The strike, which was organised by the KZN nurses committee, was not supported by the official trade unions. It involved over 1,000 enrolled nurses from major hospitals all over the province who were demanding payment of rural and scarce-skills allowances backdated to July 2003. The nurses claim that similar allowances are already paid in other provinces like the Eastern Cape.

The health authority declared that the strike was illegal and gave 728 nurses a 12-hour ultimatum to return to work or be sacked. The ultimatum was ignored.

Sizwe Kupelo, spokesperson for the Eastern Cape health department, said in February that they had warned hospital managers in the province not to employ nurses who were involved in the strike. He added that the nurses had no chance of being appointed in other provinces. "We will not create a precedent where people will embark on an illegal action in [one] province and then, when they are to face the consequences, they run to another province."

In February, the health department and trade unions set up a tribunal consisting of six lawyers to deal with the sacked nurses individually. It cleared 323 nurses who had been suspended; another 673 nurses were served with written warnings. According to the South African Broadcasting

Corporation, the tribunal recommended that the final 38 nurses should also keep their jobs, but the health department dismissed the findings and confirmed the sackings.

Nigerian college staff take strike action

On April 16, members of the Senior Staff Union of Colleges of Education (SSUCOE) began a four-day strike to protest the government's plans to merge colleges of education and polytechnics with universities. The SSUCOE has warned the government that if it fails to rescind its decision, they will call their members out on indefinite strike. The action is in support of an all-out strike against the proposed mergers organised by the Colleges of Education Academic Staff Union (COEASU) and Academic Staff Union of Polytechnic (ASUP), which began on April 6 and 16 respectively.

Striking food workers in South Africa march for wage increases

Hundreds of striking food workers, employed by Noordwes Koöperasie (NWK), marched to their employer's head offices in Lichtenburg in the North West of South Africa on April 12. They were part of the 744 workers who have been on strike since March 16 in support of a demand for a 7.5 percent wage increase.

At the company headquarters, the Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu) handed in a memorandum that proposed a compromise of an immediate increase of 6.5 percent followed by an additional increase of 0.5 percent after six months.

Fawu vice-president Elizabeth Manoto told the South African Press Association (SAPA) that the strikers would not return to work until the company agreed to their demands.

SAPA reported that scab labourers were continuing to work at the company, but production was almost non-existent.



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