

# Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

4 May 2007

## Europe

### British civil servants strike to protest low pay and job cuts

On May 1 civil servants in England and Wales staged nationwide strike action to protest low pay and job cuts. The workers are members of the Public and Commercial Services union, which reported that more than 200,000 of its members participated in the action. They are employed in some 200 government offices and include workers in courts, job centres, tax and benefit offices and museums.

The union reported that the strike had a widespread impact, causing “massive disruption”.

The strike is part of an ongoing campaign to oppose the implementation of a pay increase capped at 2 percent, while inflation is nearly 5 percent, and plans to implement up to 100,000 job losses in the sector.

### Public transport workers strike in Greece

On May 1 transport workers struck in Athens, Greece. Bus, trolley and metro workers staged rolling walkouts and electric railway drivers struck for 24 hours. The strike also included staff at the national air carrier Olympic Airlines, which was forced to cancel 42 flights, including dozens of domestic and international flights. The GSEE trade union has called a nationwide strike to be held on May 15 in response to the government’s pension fund policies.

### German engineering workers strike in pay dispute

On April 29 and 30 engineering workers in Germany staged “warning strikes” following the breakdown in talks between unions and employers. The IG Metall trade union is calling for 6.5 percent increase in their members’ pay. Employers have offered a 3 percent increase. This comprises a 2.5 percent increase and a 0.5 percent one-off payment.

On Sunday evening some 600 night shift workers at DaimlerChrysler in the city of Düsseldorf walked off the job and a further 800 DaimlerChrysler employees at another plant also struck.

Workers at a Gillette razor blade factory in Berlin were also involved in the strike and staged a demonstration outside the plant.

The union is currently negotiating a contract for 3.4 million manufacturing workers. Unions and employers organisations were to meet again for further talks on May 3 in the southwestern state of Baden-Nuremberg. The state is the location of a number of large industrial concerns including auto manufacturers DaimlerChrysler, Porsche and the electrical

engineering group Bosch.

### Warehouse staff in Dublin warehouses stage unofficial strike

Warehouse staff at several warehouses owned by the Musgrave corporation in Dublin staged wildcat action on April 27 to protest acts of discrimination against staff by management. An estimated 80 workers were involved in the industrial action. The strike ended shortly after midnight.

Almost half the workers in the Dublin warehouses are immigrant workers, largely from Poland, who are employed mainly by agencies. Musgrave owns Cetra and Supervalu in the Republic of Ireland, Londis and Budgens in Great Britain and other operations in Spain.

### Opel auto workers in Belgium vote to extend strike to protest job losses

Auto workers at Opel’s plant in Antwerp, Belgium voted this week to extend their current strike action to May 8 from May 3. Staff walked off the job last week after learning that the firm, a subsidiary of General Motors, will not produce any more than 80,000 vehicles in Antwerp starting in 2010. The firm instead plans to manufacture the model in Germany, Poland, Sweden and the UK.

In preparation for the cutting back of production, GM is to shed between 1,400 and 5,100 employees at the plant before the summer.

## Africa

### Liberian Firestone workers strikers attacked by police

At least six people were wounded and 12 people were arrested after police attacked striking employees of the Firestone Rubber Company April 27 Three days earlier 6,000 rubber plantation workers walked out to demand, among other things, the removal of a top manager whom they accused of being anti-union. After strikers set up roadblocks the police were called, together with United Nations forces, to disperse the workers. Fighting broke out after the police attacked, firing tear gas into the strikers.

One of the injured was 50-year-old worker Anthony Saah, who told an Associated Press reporter how police had beaten him with sticks. He was taken to hospital to be treated for head wounds.

Firestone is Liberia’s largest employer and has been operating in country since 1926. It is now a subsidiary of the Japanese-owned tire company Bridgestone Corporation and has a concession agreement to operate on a 200-square mile tract of

land. Government and company officials are currently reviewing the company's concession.

#### **Ghanaian health workers strike to win a pay rise**

Health workers in Accra, capital of Ghana, are on indefinite strike to demand a pay rise that will make up for several years of falling behind other workers with similar qualifications. The head of the Health Workers' Group told the BBC that while minimal service was being provided at present, doctors and nurses throughout Ghana would join the strike unless their demands were met by May 4. He said negotiations had been going on for 15 months without any progress.

The BBC also reported a separate dispute at the Korle-Bu teaching hospital—the largest in Ghana—in which more than 90 doctors were sacked for going on strike. The doctors had graduated only recently, and would have been on a correspondingly low rate of pay.

#### **Kenyan tea pickers demonstrate on May Day to highlight 4,000 job losses**

Tea plantation workers employed by multinationals in the Nandi region of western Kenya held demonstrations on May 1 to protest the sacking of more than 4,000 tea pickers. The demonstrators called for the reinstatement of those sacked and the removal of the officials responsible for deciding to cut jobs.

They marched from the offices of the Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers' Union to the offices of the Labour Ministry before continuing on to the stadium where a May Day rally was held. A spokesperson for the union said that since the sackings remaining plantation workers were being forced to work on Sundays. According to *The Nation* (Nairobi) the union is asking the Labour Minister Dr. Newton Kulundu to take action against company officials and order the reinstatement of the sacked workers.

Multinationals employ more than 40,000 tea pluckers in Kenya.

#### **Namibian meat workers strike to oppose suspension of colleague**

About 80 Namibian workers employed by Meatco in Windhoek went on strike on April 19. The action was to protest the suspension of a fellow worker, who had been accused of assaulting another employee. According to *allAfrica.com*, the action cost the company more than N\$30 million (US\$4.3 million).

The action resulted in hundreds of animals being kept in the kraals all day and the company halting the delivery of further livestock. Additional losses were caused by the fact that Meatco had to pay for additional feeding for market ready cattle. Even though the employee who made the original complaint later retracted his accusation, the company insisted, "It is Meatco's duty to act strictly and fairly, investigate all grievances and take action pending final findings."

The company claimed that the strike was illegal and issued notices demanding workers return to their jobs. The acting Secretary General of the Namibian Wholesale and Retail

Workers' Union (NWRWU) said that the strikers were refusing to do so.

#### **Nigerian civil servants on strike over pay**

Civil servants in Oyo State, Nigeria, began indefinite strike action on April 26, to demand that the state government honor an agreed to salary increase.

Chief Secretary to the state governor, Lanre Latinwo, denied the strike was taking place despite the fact that local government in the area had been brought to a halt and most of the 33 local councils were kept locked, as were the offices of the state government itself.

According to the *Daily Champion*, the union insisted that both sides had previously agreed to increase the minimum wage for civil servants to N9,677.75 (US\$79.30) per month, but the state government had reneged on this, and offered only N8,000 (US\$65.60).

#### **Thousands march in Mozambique to defend workers' rights**

Thousands of workers marched through the streets of Maputo, capital of Mozambique, on May 1, demanding that the country's proposed new labour law "maintain labour and union rights" The demonstration was massive, taking two hours to pass in front of the speakers' stand.

The proposed labour law is now before the Mozambican parliament. Employers and the unions have reached agreement on most clauses, but the unions are fighting to retain the current redundancy pay terms. The employers, supported by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, claim that their competitiveness is affected by the present redundancy terms and want to make it much cheaper to sack workers.

The final compromise offered by the union was that in the case of straightforward dismissal, workers should be entitled to 60 days pay for each year of employment. If the company claimed "structural or market reasons" for laying off workers, redundancy pay could be cut to 30 days per year.

Now the employers want to reduce redundancy pay to 15 days wages for the first year worked and seven days for each subsequent year.

#### **Strike by Zimbabwean sanitary workers**

Cleaning staff employed by the council of Zimbabwe's capital city, Harare, went on strike on April 24 over their demand for protective clothing. Garbage piled up on the city streets as workers refused to go back to work. They were demanding the provision of gumboots, gloves, masks, overalls and milk. Some of the council workforce, who had been provided with full protective clothing, joined a sit-in in solidarity with their colleagues.



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