

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

1 June 2007

## Europe

### Portuguese workers strike to protest government policies

On May 30, the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers staged a 24-hour national strike to protest the economic reforms being introduced by the Socialist Party government of Prime Minister Jose Socrates. The federation represents around 800,000 workers. The second largest trade union federation refused to support the strike.

The action had a widespread impact, affecting subway services in the capital Lisbon and ferry services into the city from across the River Tagus. Many public sector workers struck, including staff in government offices, refuse workers, postal staff, schoolteachers and health workers. Dozens of airline flights were also cancelled.

The government is seeking to slash public spending and to make it easier to hire and fire workers. This is under conditions in which the unemployment rate is currently more than 8.4 percent, the highest rate in 21 years. Since the election of the government two years ago, welfare benefits have been reduced for state sector employees and the retirement age increased. Taxes have also been raised in an effort to increase revenue. Portugal's budget deficit is the highest of the 13 countries using the euro. It also has the lowest rate of economic growth of any European country, at just 1.3 percent.

The government has faced a series of workers' protests and strikes over the last year in opposition to its policies, including a 100,000-strong demonstration in Lisbon last December.

### Postal workers strike in Belgium

Postal workers at sorting offices throughout Belgium staged a one-day strike on May 25 to demand that La Poste-De Post recruit more staff. The strike began during the evening of May 25, resulting in no mail being delivered the following morning. Barely any postal staff turned up to work during the action.

Workers are also protesting plans by the company to redraw postal routes with the aim of cutting costs.

The strike follows a two-week stoppage in the city of Ghent, protesting the transfers of some workers and the reorganisation within the company. Workers are also objecting to problems with Georoute, a computer programme used to draw up the postal routes, and other issues associated with the computerisation of postal sorting. According to an estimate, the action in Ghent has cost La Poste-De Post €10 million in lost business.

Two years ago, the post office was partially privatised when the national postal service, Post Danmark A/S, bought a 49 percent stake in it.

### Swedish flight attendants end five-day stoppage

Eight hundred flight attendants at the Swedish operation of

Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) ended their industrial action on May 29 following an agreement between the Swedish Salaried Employees' Union and management. The five-day strike had mainly affected flights to and from Sweden, while those to and from the US and Asia flew as scheduled. The Danish and Norwegian operations of SAS were also unaffected by the dispute.

The deal reportedly offers staff a 10.3 percent pay rise spread over 38 months.

The day prior to the agreement saw a total of 286 flights cancelled, with some 20,000 passengers affected. The strike had a widespread impact in Sweden, with the total number of cancellations since the strike began totalling 1,200 and at least 90,000 passengers affected. The strike cost SAS daily losses estimated at 20 million kronor (US\$2.9 million). The SAS group is the fourth largest airline in Europe in numbers of passengers and is half owned by the governments of Sweden, Norway and Denmark, with the remainder owned by private investors.

### British coastguards begin industrial action

Around 700 British coastguards began a campaign of industrial action short of a strike on May 25 in an ongoing dispute over low pay. The coastguards are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS). They are employed by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) and began the protest after 81 percent of members voted for action in a ballot.

A wage deal from last August averages just 2.5 percent for most staff, while other more experienced employees have been offered pay increases of less than 1 percent, in effect a pay cut.

The action will result in staff withdrawing from nonessential 999 emergency duties that include not issuing fishing vessel certificates, not manning the MCA information line, including the out-of-hours line, and not producing the end-of-month returns and incident reports. The latter would affect the information and statistics made available for government ministers. The coastguards will also scale back the processing of seafarer documents.

Last year, MCA management commissioned a pay comparison to look into coastguards' pay and then refused to implement its findings. One of the recommendations was to increase coastguards' pay in line with other emergency service workers. The union said this week that coastguards' pay was just £5.37 an hour for a 42-hour week—a little more than the national minimum wage.

### Tesco supermarket delivery drivers strike at Scottish depot

Delivery drivers employed by the British supermarket chain Tesco began industrial action May 24 in a dispute over a new contract and low pay. Up to 150 drivers located at the firm's Livingston depot in West Lothian, Scotland walked off the job

after the firm proposed changes to working conditions.

The strikers set up picket lines at the depot, and reports said they had succeeded in turning several delivery lorries away.

The drivers are members of the Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G).

Tesco plans to relocate the depot to another site 500 yards away and has stated that workers will lose their jobs if they do not sign new contracts. According to the T&G, the new contracts would result in worse working terms and conditions, with drivers losing between £3,000 and £6,000 each. The union also warned that the deal may lead to the union being de-recognised. It announced that it would hold a UK-wide ballot in support of the Scottish drivers pending the resolution of the dispute.

Tesco claimed that 450 of the 600 workers moving from the existing warehouse to the new one had already signed the new contracts.

### **Museum staff take industrial action in Liverpool, England**

On May 28, staff at museums in Liverpool, England, struck in a dispute over a below-inflation pay offer by National Museums Liverpool. Up to 150 workers struck during the day, which fell on a bank holiday. The workers are employed at the Maritime Museum, Liverpool Museum, Walker Art Gallery, Lady Lever Gallery, Conservation Centre, Sudley Art Gallery and Central Services.

They have been offered a pay increase of no more than 1.8 percent, with some of the most experienced staff being offered an increase amounting to just 1.3 percent. Many museum employees are low-paid, earning starting salaries as little as £11,000 per annum.

### **Scientists protest budget cut at nuclear clean-up site in Dorset, England**

On May 25, more than 200 scientists employed at the UK Atomic Energy Authority research site at Winfrith in Dorset staged a lunchtime demonstration to protest a 40 percent cut in funding for nuclear decommissioning at the site. The members of the Prospect trade union fear that the reduced budget of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority will slow down the clean-up of former plants at Winfrith and lead to job cuts.

Funding for decommissioning at Winfrith is being slashed from £44.3 million to just £15.4 million in the current fiscal year. The Winfrith site is to be integrated with Harwell site from 2008, and the combined site programme will be reduced from £101 million last year to £60 million flat funding next year and beyond.

### **Africa**

### **South African public service workers demonstrate for better pay and conditions**

Tens of thousands of public service workers demonstrated in South African towns and cities on May 25, calling for improvements in their pay and conditions. In Pretoria, more than 10,000 people marched through the city, before handing in a petition for a pay increase of 12 percent.

They carried banners, sang and chanted slogans venting their anger at Public Service and Administration Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi. Some placards read, "Fraser, let's exchange salaries."

In Cape Town, between 8,000 and 10,000 marched to the state

parliament, attempting to give their petition to Fraser-Moleketi in person.

The unions are threatening to call a national strike of public service workers unless the employers increase their current offer of 6 percent. The pay talks between unions and employers are currently deadlocked.

Teachers in Eastern Cape Province began a four-day strike on May 27, in opposition to the 6 percent increase for all public service workers. South African Democratic Teachers' Union's provincial chairperson Mzoleli Mrara told the *Daily Despatch*, "She [Fraser-Moleketi] must compare her 50 percent salary increase with the peanuts she is awarding us."

### **Kenyan pathologists strike over promotions and poor conditions**

Pathologists employed by the Kenyan government have gone on strike and camped outside the health ministry to demand that the permanent secretary listen to their grievances.

These include lack of any promotions (meaning that some pathologists have stayed in the same post for more than 21 years), a hazardous working environment made worse by the lack of ventilation, and unduly low allowances to compensate for the risks faced in their work. Kenyan doctors and dentists get a risk allowance of Sh4,000 (US\$60), but pathologists get only Sh2,000 (US\$30). The strikers said they would refuse to do any forensic or DNA testing until these issues had been addressed, meaning police investigations will be affected.

### **South African miners strike to oppose changes in workers' transport to mine**

Around 500 workers went on strike May 28 at the BHP Billiton Samancor mine, which produces manganese in the Northern Cape, South Africa. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) said the strike was to oppose discrimination against black workers at the mine.

NUM Branch Secretary Reginald Segeri stated, "Workers would like to see an end to differential treatment in which black workers walk for two kilometres to their nearest bus stop while employees of other races get their transport in front of their home gates." The NUM has accused the management of unilaterally changing the workers' conditions of service in relation to transport arrangements.



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