Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

25 January 2008

Nokia workers demonstrate against planned plant closure in Germany

On January 22, an estimated 15,000 workers demonstrated in Bochum, Germany, to protest plans by mobile phone manufacturer Nokia to close its plant in the city.

The company announced last week that it was going to close the plant—eliminating 2,300 jobs—and move production to Romania. A further 2,200 jobs of workers supplying the factory are also threatened. Nokia is the second biggest employer in the Ruhr region after the carmaker Opel.

Unions end strike at Belgian Ford plant

On January 21, management and trade unions at the Ford Auto plant in Genk, Belgium, reached an agreement to end a strike that had begun four days earlier. Workers at the plant walked off the job in a dispute over pay, fixed contracts for temporary employees and stress levels at work.

Following the deal, around 70 percent of the workforce accepted the terms of the agreement. The deal stipulates two one-off payments of 500 euros gross, the offering of fixed contracts to 200 temporary staff and the employment of extra workers in one specific area. The Genk plant employs some 6,000 workers and manufactures Ford's larger models—the Mondeo, S-Max and Galaxy.

French power workers continue strikes

Power workers in France took further industrial action this week in an ongoing protest against plans by the government to introduce attacks on their pension scheme. On January 22, workers employed by EDF and the main gas provider Gaz de France held a one-day strike against the proposals that would end longstanding pension provisions for public sector workers.

The industrial action was the fifth by the power workers in the last three months. The strike resulted in a cut of an estimated 3 percent of utility company EDF's nuclear output capacity. According to the company, this did not affect its power customers. The EDF plants hit by a reduced capacity were those at Cattenom, Bugey, Tricastin, Flamanville and Blayais.

The utility firm EDF stated that some 12 percent of employees (12,000 staff) took part in the stoppage. According to Gaz de France, 14.1 percent of its staff participated in the strike.

British Embassy staff in Dublin to strike over job losses

Staff employed at the British Embassy in Dublin have voted to strike in a dispute over job losses. The embassy plans to shed the jobs of three staff by making them compulsorily redundant.

Staff at the site are members of the Unite trade union. The embassy, employing 69 staff, is the only British diplomatic mission in the world where workers belong to a trade union. In a ballot for industrial action the staff voted in favour by a margin of 90 percent.

The staff whose jobs are threatened work in the UK Trade and Investment section at the embassy. The embassy has stated that the job losses are part of a "global strategy" to shift resources to "high growth markets." It said it plans to allocate staff to countries where prospects of economic growth are higher.

The union has announced that industrial action will be held on February 7 if the dispute is not resolved. Following talks with the British Embassy that failed to reach agreement, the union said, "Obviously there is time for discussion before then, but we will consider what further action to take if necessary."

Industrial action at the *Milton Keynes Citizen* newspaper in England

This week, journalists and photographers employed by the *Milton Keynes Citizen* staged industrial action for three days in a dispute over pay. The workers set up picket lines outside the newspaper's head office in the town, located in southeast England.

The strike began on January 21 following management's rejection of a pay claim by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ). The union is calling for a pay increase of 3.5 percent to "reflect the increased number of titles being produced with reduced staff numbers." Management has offered editorial staff a 3 percent pay deal.

The NUJ has announced that additional strikes are set to go ahead from January 28 to 30 and February 5 to 7.

Liberian diamond authentication staff on go-slow

Twenty regional officers from the Liberian Ministry of Lands, Mines and Energy have closed down their offices with a job action. They are highly skilled employees performing the "Kimberley Process"—the authentication, registration and valuation of diamonds prior to their sale—and are on a go-slow to demand pay and allowances in line with their skill and training

A spokesman for the group, Jerome Scott, who represents Camp Alpha Regional Office, told *The Inquirer* (Monrovia) that a budgetary appropriation of US$605,000 was approved in July 2007 for the Kimberly Process Certificate Scheme, but since then, nothing has been heard of how the money is being expended, especially when it comes to their allowances and adjusted pay.

"Our offices will remain closed down until something is done about our allowances and adjusted pay that would put us on par with our colleagues in the sub-region."

The officers also warned that unless their demands were met, sanctions might be re-imposed on the country's diamond industry by the United Nations. He added that if that were allowed to happen, it might lead to the rejuvenation of diamond smuggling leading to "blood diamonds roaming all over the country".

Lands, Mines and Energy Minister Eugene Shannon told the*Inquirer* that nobody had promised the regional officers that they would get allowance, adding that "government only gives allowances to ministers, their deputies, assistant ministers and directors and not civil servants."

Nigerian steel workers shut down workplace to demand union rights

Action taken by more than 300 workers at the Delta Steel Company (DSC) plant, Ovwian Aladja, has resulted in the plant being closed down for the past week. According to the *Leadership* newspaper (Abuja), the workers barricaded all the entrances to the plant from 5 a.m. each day, preventing management, other workers and customers from gaining access.

The workers have been in dispute with management for the past three weeks over its alleged failure to pay their salaries and allowances for 13 months. *Leadership* reported that barricades were set up to protest management's refusal to allow union elections to go ahead. The company supports the practice of using "caretaker" committees for all the labour unions in the company, particularly for the Iron and Steel Senior Staff Association of Nigeria and the Steel Workers Union of Nigeria. The strikers have vowed not to return to work until the management agrees to the democratisation of the leadership of the labour unions in the company.

Members of the Iron and Steel Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (ISSAN) and Steel and Engineering Workers Union of Nigeria (SEWUN) have threatened to join the strike because of their dispute over unpaid salaries from November and December of last year.

Nigerian health workers take strike action

On January 28, resident doctors at the Jos University Teaching Hospital (JUTH) in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, took strike action to demand payment of salary arrears. The doctors, who are members of the National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD), are protesting the non-implementation of a March 2007 circular on irregular allowances, which was approved by the National Salaries, Income and Wages Commission.

To put pressure on the authorities, the doctors had been following a work-to-rule on Mondays and Tuesdays each week. They accused management of trying to revive the terms of an earlier circular from January of last year, which was 22 percent less than that agreed in the later circular.

According to *allAfrica.com*, doctors claim that other tertiary health institutions have implemented the March 2007 agreement, and that management is deliberately attempting to deprive them of their rights. They claim that the hospital authorities have threatened to sack medical practitioners and have even gone ahead to advertise for their positions in the dailies.

State employees in the Plateau region have been on strike for four weeks to protest the non-payment of a 15 percent pay rise approved by the last administration.