

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

18 January 2008

Europe

Coal miners strike in southern Poland

On January 16, 10 coal miners in southern Poland began a hunger strike to demand a pay increase. The hunger strikers are about 3,450 feet underground at the state-controlled Budryk coal mine at Ornontowice in the southern Silesia region.

Miners at the pit have been involved in industrial action since the middle of December. During this month, up to a further 150 miners have joined the protest. This week, about 300 miners have been protesting at the pit top, including their wives and relatives. The same day, about 50 wives and relatives of the striking miners travelled to Warsaw to meet the Polish economy minister, Waldemar Pawlak, regarding the dispute.

The mine is set to be incorporated into the state-run Weglowa mines company. The company is Europe's largest coal producer, employing 63,000 workers in 16 mines.

Belgian automotive workers strike

On January 14, workers at a Syncreon plant in Belgium began strike action after voting by an 81 percent majority against a new proposed salary structure. The new structure offered by the company did not include a figure for a salary increase. Employees at the plant have been demanding a pay increase of €1 per hour. The plant is one of the suppliers of the local Ford plant in Genk.

The stoppage resulted in the workers at the Ford plant in Genk being sent home at 6 p.m. the same day. The following day, workers at Ford were again sent home.

Syncreon was formed from a merger of two companies—TDS logistics and Walsh Western International.

Greek dock workers continue industrial action

Industrial action by Greek dockers began its second week on January 16. The workers are striking to protest the privatisation of the country's main ports. The government is planning to sell stakes in some port facilities at the country's major ports—the majority state-owned Piraeus and Thessaloniki.

The stoppage has had a widespread impact, with shipping containers standing idle at a number of ports. According to Vassilis Korkidis, the leader of the Piraeus merchant union, "About 3,500 containers are stranded in Piraeus, mostly with

animal food and raw material for industrial use." Korkidis added that about 90 containers a day are leaving the port to be distributed in Greece or further in Europe, compared to the usual 500.

Staff strike at Areva TD electronics plant in Paris

Workers at the Areva TD plant in Montrouge, just outside Paris, began an occupation of the site last week.

The staff began the occupation and set up a blockade following an announcement by management that it will close the factory that produces electrical transformers. The workers are demanding compensation payments. At this stage, management at Areva TD is refusing to negotiate.

Postal workers strike in Paris

This week, postal workers in Paris's 8th district began industrial action against a management restructuring plan that may result in more than 100 job losses. The workers are members of the SUD-PTT and CGT trade unions.

Last week, William Jean-Baptiste, the manager in the 8th district, announced the proposed job cuts. The plan would also result in workers having to relocate to the Gonesse (Val-d'Oise) sorting office, which is more than 15 km from the district.

Postal workers in the city's 6th and 16th districts are also involved in industrial action to protest job losses and increased workloads. They are also demanding a €150 allowance for the cost of living in Paris. The workers are currently striking each Saturday in pursuit of their demands.

Bus drivers strike for third time in Wiltshire and Dorset, England

Bus drivers employed by the Wiltshire and Dorset bus company struck for the third time this week on January 16. More than 375 staff participated in the latest stoppage, a dispute over working hours. The workers are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT). The company said that the strike would affect about half of its scheduled services, with limited services running in Bournemouth. In the town of Poole, services only ran half-hourly.

The union called the strike to protest drivers being rostered to do more than 4.5 hours of continuous driving. According to Bob Crow, the general secretary of the union, the company is refusing to negotiate to resolve the dispute.

The drivers are based at bus depots in Bournemouth,

Poole, Blandford, Lymington, Ringwood and Swanage. The managing director of the company said that it did not accept the drivers' demands and claimed that the current legal maximum adopted by national bus operators was generally 5.5 hours.

A further strike is set to go ahead on January 23, pending the resolution of the dispute.

Africa

Ugandan tea workers on strike to protest bad conditions

More than 500 Ugandan tea workers employed by the Torot and Mityana Tea Estate Company, in the Mityana district of Uganda, have taken strike action to demand improvements in the housing and latrine facilities on the estate. The strikers, including both tea pluckers and casual labourers, have vowed not to return to work until their grievances are addressed.

The striking workers are also complaining about the lack of clean water, and the delays in getting their wages. They are demanding the provision of decent meals while they are at work, and also of medical services.

One striker told *New Vision* newspaper, "We work for over eight hours a day and we are given only one cup of porridge instead of a heavy meal. We use dirty water and the latrines in the camp are full."

Another worker explained that they had waited for a long time before resorting to strike action. "For so long, we have been appealing to them to address our problems. We wrote letters through our unions but they have not responded... The management must stop unnecessary dismissals. When you make any slight mistake, you are sacked without pay."

New Vision reported that when Harriet Kagaba, resident district commissioner, and Francis Muganzi, district internal security officer, toured the estate at Bulera, they were shocked by the poor sanitary conditions. They ordered the company to construct latrines immediately.

During a meeting with the workers and the company administration, Kagaba warned: "You must be careful or else epidemics like cholera will break out soon. The government wants private investors whose working environment is conducive for all parties."

South African brick workers strike over five-year pay freeze

More than 140 workers at a brick-making facility in Zebediela near Polokwane, South Africa, have gone out on strike to protest what they claim is the fifth year without a pay increase. The workers belong to the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (Satawu).

One of the strikers, Cliff Mogotlane, told the *Sowetan* that the company demanded they do overtime—even on weekends—without being paid for it. Mogotlane said he

earned R1600 (US\$237) for working as a driver for a fortnight, and his assistant earned only R600 (US\$89). He complained that the company failed to provide suitable clothing and safety boots, and that they received no compensation for injuries while at work.

He added, "On top of the total earnings for drivers, the company also deducts money which it claims is for the diesel used in transporting their own goods for the benefit of the company... Management also deducts money for cell phones and for the tyres of the lorries we drive. All these are the company's property and not ours. The company gives us a target to reach and it is becoming increasingly more difficult for all of us to reach it. We demand that this target system be done away with."

Mogotlane urged the Department of Labour to visit the company to see for themselves the conditions under which they are forced to work.

South African battery makers face lock-out

More than 300 South African employees of Willard Batteries faced a lock-out when they attempted to return to work after a four-month strike, during which the company had hired new workers to replace them.

Their union, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), had instructed them to return to work, while threatening to take the company to court over the lack of an agreement on wages. However, the company management demanded that those returning to work sign to disown the agreement or else be turned away.

The angry workers gathered outside the gates, expecting that they would be addressed by the management and the union. Before midday, they decided that they would have to go home without any clarification of their position and await a further union meeting.



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