Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

4 January 2008

Europe

Bus drivers strike in Wiltshire and Dorset in England

On December 2, hundreds of bus drivers employed by the Wilts and Dorset bus company began the first of a series of 24-hour strikes. The workers are in dispute with the firm over "excessive" working hours. More than 375 drivers walked off the job following a breakdown in talks between management and the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union.

The strikers are based at depots in Blandford, Bournemouth, Lymington, Poole, Ringwood and Swanage. The union has said drivers should not be rostered to do more than 4.5 hours of continuous driving, as it impinges on their health and safety. The company has rejected this stance, stating, "Currently drivers could be asked to drive for up to 5.5 hours, which is the legal and industry standard, without a break."

The drivers have twice voted by margins of 10 to 1 in favour of industrial action. Last summer the union suspended strike action in order to continue negotiations with the company. Further industrial action is planned for January 8, 16 and 21.

Miners strikes continue in Poland

On December 17, miners employed at 10 of the mines owned by the state-run Kompania Weglowa held a 24-hour strike in pursuit of a pay increase. The workers are demanding a 6.9 percent pay rise to cover 2007 and another raise of 14 percent in 2008. The strike was called by the Solidarity union.

The union said that it planned to authorise large-scale strikes after January 7 if the dispute were not settled.

Coal miners employed at the Budryk colliery, Upper Silesia, Poland continued strike action this week following talks between their representatives, the local colliery management and the Jastrzebska Coal Company (JSR). The strike began two weeks ago, also in a dispute over pay. Following the breakdown in negotiations, strikers said that talks had been suspended for an indefinite period. Miners are calling for pay parity with others miners at JSR, which is to take over the plant this year.

Miners are demanding a one-off payment of 8.4 thousand zloty and guarantees that those taking part in the strike will not be penalised. The company has refused to accept these demands and has condemned the industrial action as illegal. Jastrzebska is part of the Kompania Weglowa, Europe's largest coal producer. More than 63,000 workers are employed in 16 coal mines.

Bus drivers strike in Barcelona, Spain

Bus drivers in Barcelona staged three days of industrial action between December 21 and 24 to demand a five-day working week. The drivers are in dispute with the Metropolitan Transport of Barcelona (TMB). Presently drivers work a six-day week.

According to the Confederacion General de Trabajo (CGT) trade union, the action won the support of 80 percent of the drivers who walked off the job in support of the demands. The CGT has called for further strike action to be held January 2-4.

Auto component workers continue occupation at Barcelona factory

Auto workers at the Frape Behr factory in Barcelona are continuing the occupation of the plant to protest plans to make 295 workers redundant. The workers are members of the CNT, FTC-IAC, UGT, CCOO trade unions. The occupation began three months ago. The factory manufactures air conditioning and engine cooling systems. It is owned by the Behr company based in Stuttgart, Germany.

Africa

Swazi shop workers take wildcat strike action

Shop workers at the Nhlangano Spar in Swaziland took strike action at the end of 2007 to demand their wages be increased by 15 percent. The workers, members of the Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied

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Workers Union, complain that their wages have been eroded by inflation and that managers have refused to give commensurate pay increases, offering them only 7 percent.

Management recruited casual workers to take the place of the strikers, further inflaming their anger. Police were drafted into the Nhlangano Mall shopping complex and the workers threatened with forceful removal if they did not move away from their workplace.

Gambian hotel workers in sit-down strike to demand pay rise

Workers at the Senegambia Hotel in Gambia started a sit-down strike at the end of December 2007 to demand a 50 percent salary increase as well as other benefits.

Senegambianews.com reported that the hotel's activities had been severely limited by the strike. The news site reported that while the hotel had been improved in many ways, the workers were still on "meager" wages.

Cocoa workers strike in Ivory Coast

Staff members of the Coffee and Cocoa Bourse (BCC) in the Ivory Coast were on strike for at least two days from December 27, 2007. This meant cocoa shipments could not be registered for export. A major part of world cocoa production comes from Ivory Coast.

The strikers are demanding improved pay and conditions as well as the removal of the BCC's director general, Tano Kassi. The secretary general of the staff union, Augustin Kouassi N'Goran, has accused Kassi of threatening the union without trying to address its demands.

A two-day strike took place earlier in December, with the government agreeing to hold talks. The lack of any negotiations forced the union to renew strike action.

Malawian telecom workers strike over pensions

Workers at the Malawi Telecommunications Limited (MTL), which has recently been privatized, have resumed the strike action they began one month ago. The action took place at Lilongwe and Blantyre, but is also now expected to take place in the northern city of Mzuzu.

The first strike followed management's announcement that 400 employees were to be laid off as part of its restructuring process.

A technician based at Chichiri Telephone Exchange in Blantyre told the *Nyasa Times*, "The employees were not happy with the way management handled pension benefits, so they sought [the] court's intervention which ruled that the company was at a fault and ordered it to pay the workers their benefits within 21 days. However, the company has done nothing since then."

Many of the workers at MTL had been dismissed and then were re-employed last year after privatization. The *Nyasa Times* reported that workers in Blantyre were determined not to return to work until "these tight-fisted people give us our benefits." It also reported that MTL managers are already planning further retrenchments.

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