

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

16 May 2008

Europe

Spanish steel workers strike at Sidenor/Gerdau

Steel workers employed at Sidenor/Gerdau plants in Spain held a 24-hour strike on May 8 in opposition to the firm's decision to increase working hours by 40 hours annually per worker. The increase in working hours is to be implemented at the beginning of 2009.

The workers are represented by four trade unions affiliated to the International Metalworkers' Federation. The strike followed two months of negotiations between the unions and management that failed to reach an agreement.

In January 2006, the Gerdau steel company bought a 40 percent stake in Spanish specialty steelmaker Sidenor for €463.3 million.

Workers end hunger strike at Russian biochemical plant

On May 8 employees at the Lobvinskiy biochemical plant in the Sverdlovsk region of Russia ended their hunger strike following an agreement with management to clear wage arrears. The company wrote a letter stating that all unpaid wages will be cleared by June 10.

Some 550 workers are employed at the Lobvinskiy plant. By April this year workers at the plant were owed more than 19 million roubles in wage arrears.

The strike began on April 23 and involved 19 workers. After several weeks on hunger strike, one female employee was taken to a local hospital with a diagnosis of hypertensive crisis.

England: bus drivers take unofficial strike action at Arriva Bus

On May 7, 70 bus drivers staged a wildcat strike at the Arriva Bus company's depot in Speke, Merseyside. The workers are in dispute over new rotas and working hours. The dispute centres on the company's planned new services to Liverpool One—a new £1 billion shopping centre, set to open on May 29.

The action resulted in more than 100 buses being halted, leaving thousands of passengers stranded from 6

a.m. Later in the day the strikers returned to work following talks with local trade union officials.

Workers strike at Ormonde Brick in Ireland

Workers at the Ormonde Brick Company struck on May 6 at the firm's Castlecomer factory in County Kilkenny, Ireland. The strike centres on redundancies and other issues relating to the extended layoff period currently being implemented.

According to the firm, the action was unofficial and it called on the SIPTU trade union to end the strike. A company statement read, "Unofficial industrial action was taken by a small group of employees at the Ormonde Brick at 08.00 hrs this morning, Tuesday, May 6. The company has advised SIPTU, the employees' trade union, of this matter and expressed its concern regarding this breach of procedures. The company has also advised that it is prepared to meet with the employee representatives to discuss any underlying issues when the unofficial action has ceased."

The company has been hit by the downturn in the construction industry in Ireland and, as part of its rationalisation program, has implemented the redundancies and imposed a shutdown until July. This has been carried out in agreement with the SIPTU trade union.

Africa

South African local government workers strike over pay and conditions

Local government workers employed by the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality (formerly known as Pretoria) downed tools on May 5 in what their employers claim is an "illegal and unprotected" strike. The action has led to rubbish being left uncollected and the suspension of bus services in the capital city.

The strikers are members of the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU). They are demanding improved salaries, a standardized salary grading system and fairer labour practices.

The Tshwane Mayoral Committee has threatened: “Any employee who participates in the strike shall be subjected to disciplinary measures in line with disciplinary procedure, collective agreement and applicable legislation.”

On May 13, SAMWU agreed with the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality to establish a “technical team” with a view to resolving the strike.

Six people have been arrested in the city, accused of tipping over dustbins and strewing litter about the streets.

Tanzanian BP workers refuse to accept retrenchment

Oil workers employed by British Petroleum (BP) in Tanzania are threatening to take strike action if the company goes ahead with its retrenchment plans, which the workers claim are illegal.

Managers had given the workforce until May 12 to sign forms agreeing to the retrenchment, without any knowledge of the details of the retrenchment package. The Tanzania Union of Industrial and Commercial Organizations (Tuico) has asked the workers to ignore the directive. Local Tuico chairman, Mathews Giraita, told the *Citizen* (Dar es Salaam), “The management has not signed the agreed collective bargaining agreement or released the new company structure to enable employees to make informed choices.”

BP currently employs 180 workers in Tanzania, mostly in Dar es Salaam, down from 400 only six years ago. The proposed cut in numbers would be the third in the last six years.

Strike at Namibian zinc mine halts production

Workers at the Skorpion Zinc Mine in the south of Namibia have brought production to a halt, in a strike resulting from a long-standing dispute over pay. After arbitration by the Namibian Labour Commissioner failed, the Mineworkers’ Union of Namibia (MUN) proposed strike action.

The strike began on May 9, after a 90 percent vote in favour. Workers picketing outside the main entrance to the mine told *New Era* (Windhoek) that they would continue with the action until the company gave in to their demands.

The strikers are demanding a 14 percent wage increase plus overtime payments for working on weekends and holidays and allowances for housing and transport. The company initially offered 11 to 12

percent, but has since reduced the offer to 10 percent. The workers’ last pay increase was in October 2005, more than 18 months ago.

MUN branch chairman, Michaeleno Kadhikwa, told the *Nambian*, “The company management called police reinforcement under false pretences that workers had become violent, instead of focusing on the wage talks to find an amicable solution.”

He accused management of breaking an agreement about who was to perform safety maintenance at the mine during the strike. The workers had put padlocks in some places to enable them to control access, but management broke the padlocks to enable contractors to be used to do jobs they had agreed to leave to the workers themselves.

Skorpion Zinc normally produces 150,000 tonnes of special high-grade (SHG) zinc per year and exports its products to Europe, Asia and South Africa. The mine is owned by Anglo Base Metal.



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