Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

30 May 2008

Europe

Polish teachers take nationwide strike action

On May 27, Polish schoolteachers staged a one-day strike in pursuit of better pay, protection of their retirement rights and more education funding.

Thousands of teachers participated in the nationwide stoppage, with the action affecting about half of Poland's schools and kindergartens. The teachers are members of the Polish Teachers' Union, which represents half of the country's 600,000 teachers.

Teaching staff are demanding their monthly wages of between 900 zlotys (US$450) and 2,000 zlotys (US$1,000) be doubled in the next two years. It is the seventh stoppage by teachers in the union since 1993.

Ireland: Labour Relations Court seeks end of train drivers' strike

Train drivers in Cork, Ireland, are to vote on the details of an agreement following a seven-day wildcat strike.

The unofficial action began last week after a train driver in Cork was removed from the payroll when he refused a change in his rostered duties. Forty other drivers based in Cork immediately took strike action following his removal. The strike hit many of the rail company Iarnród Éireann's (Irish Rail's) services, with up to 15,000 passengers affected each day. Intercity connections from Dublin to Cork and Kerry were cancelled as well as other routes such as Cork/Cobh, Cork/Mallow and Cork/Trale.

On May 26, the drivers had refused to return to work on the basis that they would first have to sign a declaration that they would not engage in unofficial action again.

On May 29, following talks between Iarnród Éireann and the Labour Relations Court (LRC), trade union officials said there would be a ballot on a fresh agreement to end the dispute, which did not include the unofficial strike declaration.

Norwegian state employees continue industrial action

Striking teachers and other state employees in Norway continued their industrial action last week. As of May 27, many schools and primary schools were closed. Day care centre workers, healthcare workers and municipal employees are also involved in the strike that involves about 3,000 people.

The strike was called by the Confederation of Unions for Professionals, Norway (Unio) and began following a breakdown in talks between the trade union and the local authorities. Unio is involved in the talks with three other trade unions and local authority mediators. According to reports, the other unions have accepted a pay settlement of just over 6 percent.

A report in the *Aftenpoften* newspaper this week stated that a further 4,900 public sector workers could join the stoppages on June 30.

Africa

General strike in Burkina Faso protests rising food prices

Workers in Burkina Faso held a three-day general strike in the third week of May to protest the rising cost of living. It was the second such strike in six weeks. The action involved a coalition of about 20 unions and civil organisations.

The *Mail & Guardian* reported that tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets in towns across the country, including Koudougou, Bobo Dioulasso and Fada-Ngourm. In the capital, Ouagadougou, demonstrators marched to the city centre. Some carried pots and pans and empty sacks of rice, shouting slogans like "No to the freezing of salaries and pensions!" and "No to the rising cost of living!"

The strikers are demanding a 25 percent pay increase for public- and private-sector workers, backdated to January 2001. They are also calling for a "significant and effective" reduction in prices, the introduction of price controls, and a regular supply of such foodstuffs as rice, maize, beans, oil, salt, sugar and milk.

Following similar demonstrations in February—some of which were violently dispersed by state forces—the government reduced taxes on basic goods for six months, but these measures have had little effect. At the same time, the government promised to set up "reference

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shops" where basic goods like rice, cooking oil and soap would be sold at fixed prices. According to the*Monitor* (Kampala), however, these measures did not have the expected effect on the lives of ordinary citizens.

The *Monitor* reported that strikers were promising "more action" unless the government acted upon their demands for lower prices.

Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in the world, has been badly hit by the worldwide rise in commodity prices.

South African local government workers on indefinite strike

Local government workers in Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality downed tools on May 27 in an indefinite strike, leaving rubbish uncollected and bus services at a standstill.

Members of the South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) are demanding increased wages and that all employees should be made permanent.

Samwu Branch Secretary Koena Ramotlou told *Business Day* (Johannesburg) that about 8,000 workers had downed tools, rate halls and libraries had been closed and grass had not been cut. He said more than 3,000 workers marched to the municipal offices in Germiston, but were disappointed when the municipality refused to accept their memorandum.

"They claimed that the strike is illegal," he said, "which is not true. The municipality obtained an interdict which prevented only essential services workers from participating in the strike, and we did not oppose it."

Spokesperson for the municipality, Zweli Dlamini, said that many towns had been hard hit, including Kempton Park, Alberton, Boksburg and Springs. He said the authority was using contract workers to provide essential services while the strike continues.

Ramotlou told the South African Broadcasting Corporation that the strikers would picket in all the towns in the East Rand.

Rubber bullets fired at striking Namibian zinc miners

On May 27, rubber bullets were fired to disperse a crowd of 50 striking Skorpion Zinc miners, who were demonstrating against the company lockout. Two workers received bruises in the onslaught.

The Rosh Pinah Police Station commander, Inspector Chrispin Mubebo, told the *Namibian* (Windhoek) that the local manager of G4 Security, Andrew Mostert, had been arrested and charged with assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm. He said, "The workers that were struck by the rubber bullets only sustained bruises.... Because of a court order preventing workers from picketing on or outside the mine premises, the workers requested permission from the local police to stage a peaceful march at the village." Skorpion's general manager, Gerald Boting, allegedly instructed Mostert to disperse the protesting workers. Mostert was freed on bail of N$2,000 and is set to appear in court later.

The strike at Skorpion Zinc, which began on May 10, would have ended when the Mineworkers' Union of Namibia (MUN), said they accepted the management's latest offer of a 12 percent increase and a monthly housing allowance of N$1,780. The strike was suspended on May 20.

However, management insisted that any agreement had to be conditional on the union endorsing their application for an exemption from the payment of overtime for work on Sundays and for other hours worked in addition to the normal 12-hour shift. The union made it clear that it could not accept wage increases linked to such conditions. Management then imposed a lockout and have since been trying to persuade individual workers to sign an endorsement of the company's application for the right to perform continuous operation.

On May 23, the National Executive Committee of MUN met and decided "to put its members countrywide on a maximum alert for the national strike in support of the currently suspended strike at Skorpion Zinc Mine." In a statement, the union said, "MUN regards the [lockout] move by the company as nothing else than a barbaric act, the continuation of white domination, or supremacy and punitive appliance leveled against the striking employees. This is a clear indication of a daylight victimisation of the strikers by the company."

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