Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

6 June 2008

Europe

London bus workers strike over dismissal of shop steward

Members of the Unite trade union at CT Plus Bus Company, based in Hackney, London, took strike action on June 2.

Bus drivers, supervisors, engineers and administration staff voted overwhelmingly for the action following the sacking of union shop steward Denis Shine. He had been in his post for just four weeks when the company dismissed him for taking action over what he insists was a genuine health and safety issue.

CT Plus buses provide Transport for London, school contracts and special need services and recently won a transport contract for the 2012 Olympics games. Further strike action is planned for June 13.

Norwegian public sector strike gains support

A strike by teachers, day care centre workers and some health care personnel has entered its second week, winning backing from the majority of Norwegians who support the demand for higher pay.

A study, conducted by research firm Respons for newspaper *Aftenposten*, showed that almost three-quarters of respondents were sympathetic to the strike by teachers, pre-school teachers and nurses.

Strike at Deutsche Postbank

The German service sector trade union Verdi has called strikes against Deutsche Postbank's plan to move 1,700 payment transaction staff to a separate corporate entity, BCB. In a statement, Verdi stated that the strikes, which began on June 2, are intended to target retail banking focused on Postbank's payment transaction operations in Munich and Hamburg.

The industrial action also involved BCB staff in Frankfurt am Main, Germany's financial capital, as well as Dortmund and Saarbruecken, Verdi said.

Finnish workers at top paper and pulp producer may strike

The Finnish Confederation of Salaried Employees has threatened strike action against the world's top paper and pulp producer, Stora Enso. The confederation says it will shut down paper and pulp mills at 10 locations of the Finnish-Swedish paper maker if no agreement is reached on a wage deal by noon on June 16.

The wage deal is for about 6,500 paper industry white-collar staff and 1,000 of them would take part in the industrial action in Finland, the union said. Their current wage deal ran out at the end of last week.

The strike action at Stora Enso could spread to other paper firms. Finland is also home to paper makers UPM-Kymmene and M-real.

Riot police end occupation of Greek power plant

According to Libcom.org June 2, riot police evicted workers at the Agios Dimitrios Power Plant after they had occupied it for 23 days. The Union against Unemployment had blockaded the input and output conveyor belts at one of Greece's major power-plants by demanding re-employment, environmental reform and withdrawal of charges against victimised workers.

According to the same web site, serious clashes have ensued in efforts to release the arrested union members.

On May 10, the residents of Agios Dimitris, where the National Electric Company (DEH) holds its majors units, employing the vast majority of the working population, formed a local Union against Unemployment and occupied the north gate of the power plant.

The blockade was manned in shifts by all the residents of the township, including children, in solidarity with the industrial action. The union demanded the reemployment of sacked workers at DEH units in the region, measures for the protection of the environment, and an immediate withdrawal of charges pressed against 70 residents of the area for similar mobilisations last year.

The National Electric Company, however, proceeded to press charges against the union, arguing its action is causing it enormous losses, for which it claimed €1 million compensation per day (the minimum salary in Greece is €650 per month).

Aiming to put public pressure on those occupying the plant, DEH claimed the occupation was threatening to put on hold all four units of the Agios Dimitrios Plant, one of the largest in the country, threatening the whole country's electricity supply. In reality the industrial action was decreasing overall electric production capacity by only 500 megawatts.

The corporate-friendly media waged a campaign warning of the possibility of blackouts in response to the crisis.

Following this, the occupiers refused to hold talks with the local authorities and the minister of development when they demanded the unblocking of the conveyor belts as a guarantee of the negotiations.

On June 2, at 5:00 a.m., Greek riot police forces ended the blockade, arresting six men including the president of the union. During the consequent protest march in the nearby industrial city of Kozani three more people were arrested during clashes with the police, and one protester was seriously wounded.

The arrested members of the union have been released to stand trial in September.

Scottish council workers in one-day strike over pay and working hours

Around 5,000 trade workers in a number of councils across Scotland are staging a one-day walkout in a dispute over pay.

According to the BBC, the Unite union said craft workers such as electricians and plasterers and plumbers have complained of being forced to work longer hours than council colleagues.

Workers in Glasgow, Dundee, Edinburgh, Fife, and North & South Lanarkshire are amongst those taking strike action, which could be repeated every two weeks.

Unite said it rejected the offer of 2.45 percent because it claimed other workers for Scottish local authorities received more.

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The union also said its members worked 39 hours, while other local authority employees worked a 37-hour week.

The workers who are on strike maintain council properties, including schools, houses and public buildings.

Polish postal workers strike over working conditions

Executives from Polish Post have failed to come to an agreement with trade unions over working conditions at the company. As a result, employees have begun strike action as part of their fight for higher wages.

The workers had demanded 800 PLN gross (US$380) per month. In the final stages of the talks the union agreed to a 533 PLN gross pay rise but management would only agree to a 305 PLN gross increase.

Middle East

Wildcat strike by Israeli rail workers

Workers at the Dimona train station in Israel went on strike May 29 to protest the sacking of a veteran colleague.

The fired worker was the first of some 15 expected to be forced into early retirement this year at the Dimona station as part of an agreement between Histadrut and Israel Rail.

The rail employees claim that representatives from the national union's management had told them that they will be fired as well if they expose their working conditions. These include having to work 16-17 hours a day without proper compensation and a several other, unspecified "safety violations."

On June 1, workers blockaded the station, stopping passenger and freight trains. A solidarity meeting was also held, consisting of many sympathetic Dimona residents as well as union representatives from factories in the surrounding area.

Africa

Sudanese oil workers on strike to win pay rise

Oil workers employed by Petrodar Operating Co. in Sudan downed tools on May 29 to demand a pay rise, after being told that they would get nothing by the governor of Upper Nile state.

Workers' spokesman Alfred Kuoir was reported by *Bloomberg.com* as saying, "We were not happy when Governor Gatluak Deng refused to support our demands, which include an increase in salary and compensation of workers injured while on duty."

Forty percent of shares of Petroliam Nasional (known as Petronas) are owned by Petroliam Nasional, 41 percent by China National Petroleum Corp., and 8 percent by the state-owned company, Sudan Petrolium. In 2006, Petronas opened a new oil pipeline to carry 200,000 barrels per day from the Melut Basin to Port Sudan on the Red Sea.

Two striking local government workers shot in South Africa

Two striking municipal workers in the Ekurhuleni district of South Africa were shot and wounded by security guards on June 2. The guards, who had been brought in by the local council, were employed by a private company called the Red Ants.

Inspector Veli Nhlapo of the local police told *Sapa*, "One was shot in the stomach and the other one in the hand. A case of attempted murder has been opened."

SA Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) spokesman Koena Ramotlou said other workers had been shot at and hurt in Alberton. But, he insisted, "Workers will not be scared away from their strike ... and will continue to ensure that their rights are protected." He added that workers would continue picketing at their respective workplaces in Kempton Park, Brakpan, Edenvale, Nigel and Tembisa.

Management is insisting that the strike action has had minimal effect, involving "nonessential services" such as parks and recreation, waste removal and cemetery services. They claim that no more than 2,000 workers are involved. Samwu, on the contrary, claims that 8,000 of its members have been on strike since May 27. They are demanding that the authority integrates Tembisa Waste Project employees and makes them permanent. They also are demanding to be paid on the same grade as councilors.

Namibian zinc miners told to return to work by their union

A 19-day strike at Africa's biggest zinc mine, Skorpion Zinc in Namibia, has ended after Miners' Union of Namibia (MUN) President Andries Eiseb signed an agreement with management. The agreement comes only days after 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."

The terms of the settlement give the company most of its key demands. The miners will now have to work shifts of 12 hours a day for seven consecutive days. The MUN also agreed that Skorpion Zinc could apply to the Labour Ministry for "continuous operations status," meaning that it would be exempt from some sections of the Labour Act.

The pay increase accepted by the union was 12 percent instead of the original demand of 14 percent. The union also agreed to a "no work, no pay" clause. The *Namibian* (Windhoek) reported that other details of the agreement were not disclosed to the media at the signing ceremony.

Skorpion is a subsidiary of international mining giant Anglo American. It normally produces 150,000 tonnes of special high-grade (SHG) zinc per year and exports its products to Europe, Asia and South Africa.

South African gold miners on strike in spite of court order

Around 3,300 South African miners belonging to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) have been on strike at the DRDGold mine at Blyvooruitzicht, near Carletonville, since May 29.

The company was immediately granted an interim court order declaring the strike illegal. All underground production ceased when the strike began, and the NUM has said that surface operations have also been affected.

According to *Mining Weekly* the strike was in protest against the appointment of a supervisor who "had a bad reputation with workers" after the resignation of a mine supervisor. *Mining Weekly* commented that the dispute was aggravated "by the police arresting two mineworkers in connection with a murder that had occurred late last year."

Members of the other union at the mine, Solidarity, are not currently on strike.

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