

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

18 July 2008

Europe

Swedish bus drivers strike

A long-running dispute amongst Sweden's bus drivers, originating in Stockholm and Vasterbotten, has evolved into a national strike after unions and employers failed to negotiate a settlement on pay, working hours and conditions. The drivers' union, Kommunal, had apparently offered the company, Bussarbetsgivarna, an olive branch in a bid to bring an end to the strike. "We want an agreement that gives our members working for private bus companies the same working conditions as those working for the municipal bus companies and others on the labour market," said Kommunal's chief negotiator Håkan Pettersson in a statement. Kommunal has called for a wage increase of 1,600 kronor per month spread out over two years, as well as the right to at least 11 hours' rest between shifts.

Strike notice at the Dublin Port Tunnel

The Irish trade union SIPTU served a 14-day strike notice July 9 on Transroute Tunnel Operations, the operator at the Dublin Port Tunnel. The notice comes into effect on July 23, and if the strike goes ahead, it will close the tunnel.

The proposed strike action is centred on a long-running claim on behalf of the port workers to bring their pay and terms of employment into line with the industry norm. Currently, the workforce can earn over 30 percent less than the average industry wage, although they must provide a round-the-clock, 365-day-a-year service.

SIPTU members voted unanimously to reject a Labour Court recommendation because it left a large number of them even worse off than at present. Transroute has been granted a five-year state contract by the National Roads Authority to run the Dublin Port Tunnel.

Polish shipyard workers protest EU ruling

According to a July 8 report on AFP, "thousands of

workers at Poland's main shipyards downed tools on Friday and called on the government to defend their jobs amid fears a [European Union] ruling could bankrupt their industry."

More than 2,000 workers protested at the headquarters of the Gdynia shipyard on the Baltic Sea coast.

On July 11, around 200 workers from neighbouring Gdansk travelled to nearby Sopot to demonstrate outside the home of Prime Minister Donald Tusk, where they were met by a heavy police presence.

The largest demonstration was in the northwestern port of Szczecin, where 3,000 workers from another threatened shipyard went on strike.

On July 9, the European Commission gave Warsaw 24 hours to produce restructuring plans for Szczecin, Gdynia and Gdansk, saying that unless Polish authorities produce viable restructuring plans, it will have to consider state aid to the yards as illegal.

The three yards and their subcontractors employ a total of 60,000 people.

The sites have historic associations as dozens were killed there when Stalinist security forces fired on workers demonstrating against food price rises in 1970. The Gdansk shipyard is where the union movement Solidarnosc was formed during a strike in 1980.

Hungarian rail strikes resume

One of Hungary's largest railway unions, VDSZSZ (the Free Trade Union of Railway Workers), called for an indefinite strike from July 14 to protest the government's rejection of its pay demands, according to a report by Reuters.

The union said it wanted a 10 percent wage increase on top of the 6.9 percent already awarded for 2008. It is also seeking a one-off 250,000 forint (US\$1,525) payout to each of Hungary's 35,000 railway workers due to the privatisation of the company's cargo unit.

The state-owned railway firm MAV is Hungary's largest employer.

The union held several strikes earlier this year but suspended them in March as it negotiated with the government, which has repeatedly stated it will not meet any of the union's demands.

Africa

South African miners strike after deaths of two colleagues

All production stopped on July 14 when miners downed tools in a one-day strike at the Virginia operations, owned by Harmony Gold in Free State, South Africa. According to a report in *Mining Weekly*, the action was to protest the deaths of two of their colleagues who had been killed at the mine within five days.

Management claimed that 6,500 workers had joined the strike, but the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) claimed that 7,800 workers were involved.

Lesiba Seshoka, a spokesperson for the NUM, told the paper, "Workers are sending a message that says enough is enough." He said that the union had resolved to down tools for a day every time a mineworker was killed.

Kenya hit by transport strikes

Workers employed by Kenya's Rift Valley Railways (RVR) returned to work on July 16 after a 10-day strike. The action was over the failure of management to pay workers last month's salary. The stoppage on the railways paralysed the port of Mombassa, causing a backlog of 15,000 containers.

The Nation (Nairobi) reported that the strike was called off after consultations between workers and management. Managing Director Roy Puffet issued a press release insisting that the strike had ended without conditions, but management had undertaken to "speedily address their grievances." However, the paper reported informed sources at RVR had said that six employees sacked during the strike had been reinstated. They also reported that RVR had agreed to implement salary increases within five weeks as stipulated by the Federation of Kenya Employees.

RVR has been criticised because of its failure to invest in new locomotives and to complete repairs of the line. During the strike, Puffet announced that the company had plans to lay off 20 percent of its workforce.

Despite the return to work by the railway workers, disruption at the port of Mombassa continued when

port workers walked out on strike July 16. They were protesting the introduction on July 1 of a new seven-day work schedule.

The union representing the port workers has turned to the industrial courts, hoping that they will reverse a previous decision allowing the port authority to proceed with implementation of the unpopular changes.

Zambian miners strike

Miners at Konkola Copper Mines' (KCM's) Nkana integrated business unit (IBU) in Kitwe stopped work on July 14 to protest inadequate salary increases awarded by management. Workers from both morning and afternoon shifts gathered around the loading bay for six hours and refused to disperse until they had been addressed by an official of the National Union of Miners and Allied Workers (NUMAW).

According to the *Times of Zambia*, they vowed to continue with the protest on the following day and said it was mockery for management to award them 15 percent because it did not translate to the amount of work they were doing.

The majority of workers ended their sit-in after being addressed by union officials. "The union officials held briefings with the miners in groups starting from the smelter to the refinery section," one of the miners told the *Times*.

Police in riot gear were keeping watch over the mine after operations had resumed. Some miners told the paper that developments at the mine were still unpredictable.

Twelve of the miners involved in the action were dismissed for allegedly taking part in a work disruption when the go-slow ended. They were not allowed to enter the plant, and their passes were confiscated. They told the *Times* that policemen had picked them up at midnight on June 14 and taken them to the mine offices where they had been interrogated.



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