

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

22 May 2009

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

France: Energy workers' strike slows nuclear reactor maintenance

Energy workers at Electricite de France (EDF), who have been protesting over pay since the start of the year, are preventing reactors that stop for planned maintenance from restarting on schedule, Reuters reported May 20. The stoppage will cost EDF millions of euros in the process.

The electricity workers are asking for a 5 percent pay rise and a one-off bonus of €1,500 (US\$2,045).

Facilities affected have been those at the Chinon, Cruas, Blayais, Paluel and Dampierre plants. Industrial action was also taking place at the Cattenom and Chooz plants, where workers delayed maintenance work.

French nuclear workers cut 2,900 megawatts in power capacity in a one-day strike on May 19.

France: Rail strike planned for May 26 Day of Protest

Rail unions are planning to organise a strike on May 26 to coincide with a nationwide day of protest against President Nicolas Sarkozy's handling of the economic crisis.

The demands of the workers include better pay and pension benefits, negotiations over the privatisation of SNCF freight services and improving industrial relations.

France's eight unions have called for a day of protest on May 26 and on June 13 to press demands for job security during the economic crisis.

Germany: Child care workers broaden strike

Public day child care centres remained closed in much of the country for a third day, on May 19, as workers staged strikes to pressure state employers to provide better wage and healthcare benefits, according to a report from thelocal.de.

The dispute spread into the western state of Rhineland-Palatinate, where up to 3,000 day care and social workers plan to take action at some 100 child care facilities.

In Bavaria, workers from children's services and state-run social work offices also joined the strike after around 400 day care centres closed their doors on May 18.

More than 2,000 child care providers are expected at a demonstration

held by Verdi and the Education and Science Workers' Union (GEW) in Frankfurt.

On May 18, around 15,000 workers participated in the strike.

Unions say current wages for 220,000 centre staff across the country are unfair, and workers need better healthcare options to handle the strain of their jobs.

Italy: Fiat workers strike in Sicily

Workers at Fiat's Termini Imerese plant in Sicily stopped work and blocked a road May 14 in protest as reports the facility would be closed under plans to create the world's second-largest carmaker, according to a Reuters report.

Fiat intends to take a 20 percent stake in US carmaker Chrysler and is in talks to acquire the European operations of struggling General Motors.

It is believed that the company's proposal will involve downsizing its Pomigliano d'Arco plant near Naples and closing the Termini facility, which employs around 1,400 workers making the Lancia Ypsilon and smaller Fiats such as the Panda.

Russia: Ford plant workers protest

According to RIA Novosti, around 150 workers from a Ford car plant near St. Petersburg held a protest rally on May 15 against a four-day working week at the facility.

While implementing a four-day working week, the workers say that the management of the plant, which is located in the Leningrad Region town of Vsevolozhsk, has increased the daily output plan. As a result, workers have lost 15 percent of their wages, while the total output of cars has remained at almost the same level.

The protesters also demand improvement in the plant's social support facilities, particularly better healthcare.

Union leader Alexei Etmanov said that the rally was unlikely to be the last and that the workers were prepared to stand up for their rights.

The Ford plant began its work in Vsevolozhsk in 2002. It currently employs about 2,000 workers, and produced 65,000 Ford Focus and Ford Mondeo cars last year. Some 1,000 employees halted production on November 20, 2007, demanding a 30 percent pay rise. The strike ended when management agreed to increase wages by up to 21 percent.

In September 2008, a further 8-10 percent wage increase was agreed. The dispute apparently cost the plant 4.5 million rubles (US\$125,600). Management filed a compensation claim against the workers, but it was rejected.

The Associated Press said, "foreign automakers had been looking to the Russian market to bolster flagging sales in the more saturated Western countries, but those hopes have been dimmed as Russia's economy is

hammered by the financial crisis.”

Finland: Protests by freelance journalists About 350 freelance journalists and their supporters participated in a rally outside Sanomatalo (Helsinki), the main building of the Finnish-based multinational media company Sanoma on May 13, according to Trade Union News (www.artto.kaapeli.fi).

In April, Sanoma News unilaterally informed freelance journalists, photographers and illustrators that it had introduced a new contract that includes:

- exclusive rights of the publisher over freelancers’ material;
- full rights to use the material in all units of the Sanoma group;
- all rights to sell the material further;
- right to modify the material and publish it in another form of expression (e.g., change a comic strip to an animation);
- that it be allowed to pay for the purchase 21 days after the first publication;
- that freelancers take responsibility of damage compensation and court expenses, concerning, for example, rights disputes.

The protesters called on Sanoma News, part of the Sanoma Group, to negotiate. The Sanoma Group operates in 20 countries. It publishes newspapers, magazines and books and is also active in broadcasting and on the Internet. Sanoma group is one of the largest magazine publishers in Europe. More than half of the group’s net sales takes place outside of Finland. It plans to cease cooperation with freelancers who do not sign the new contract.

Northern Ireland: Sacked traffic wardens hold protest

A protest took place on May 19, outside the NCP offices in May Street, Belfast, of sacked traffic attendants, according to UTV News.

The former workers also gathered at the headquarters of the Department for Regional Development at Clarence Court in Adelaide Street.

Last month, NCP suspended and then dismissed 25 attendants after they stopped work, in protest over health and safety concerns.

UTV News reiterated that the former traffic wardens, all members of the public service union NIPSA, said the company had failed to address a range of grievances.

NIPSA, Northern Ireland’s largest public service trade union, is involved in a campaign to overturn the dismissals.

South African doctors picketing over pay and conditions

State-employed doctors in Western Cape, South Africa, are to join staff in other parts of the country who are carrying out lunchtime pickets to demand substantial improvements in pay and working conditions.

Doctors are demanding increases of between 50 and 70 percent. They have expressed outrage over an offer from the government of between 0.28 and 2 percent, which they describe as a “severe insult.”

Dr. Claudia de Waal, at Helen Joseph Hospital in Johannesburg, expressed the frustration felt by medical staff when she told the *Mail and Guardian*, “We are the ones who have to work under terrible conditions and taking no tea times, working 30 hours because of so many patients that need our attention.” This was confirmed by Dr. Marinus van der Weshuizen, an intern at the same hospital, who told the paper that he often works shifts of 36 hours, leading to “severe lack of concentration”.

A breakaway from the South African Medical Association (Sama), the

United Doctors’ Forum (UDF) was formed at the end of April after many doctors expressed their impatience with slow pace of negotiations between Sama and the government. The new organisation is claiming that more than 4,900 doctors have defected to it from Sama.

The UDF has announced plans for joint action with other health professionals in the very near future. It claims it has been approached by social workers, physiotherapists, dieticians and others and is planning to close “all state hospitals in the country in a one-day strike.”

Zambian safari workers strike

Union members at the David Livingstone Safari Lodge and Spa have begun an all-out strike to demand improved pay and conditions of service.

The workers currently earn as little as K100 (USmce_marker.02) per hour as overtime “enhancement.” Their union also says the workers suffer from a lack of transport and verbal abuse from management that can border on racism.

Union chairman Morris Sanglube told Zambia Watchdog that none of the strikers would return to work “until management agreed to negotiate with the union for reasonable salaries for workers at the lodge.” He claimed that their current pay was “contrary to the pay agreed upon in their respective contracts.”

Auto workers protest at GM plants in South Africa

Auto workers at General Motors plants in Eastern Cape, South Africa, are carrying out daily lunchtime protests outside two branches of the company over management plans for 300 dismissals.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) insists that the dismissals are null and void because the company did not comply with Section 189a of the Labour Relations Act. Numsa is appealing to the Labour Court to act on its behalf.

Since January 2008, around 1,000 workers have been retrenched.

South African municipal workers strike

The South African Municipal Workers’ Union (Samwu) is organising a one-day secondary strike of municipal workers in Johannesburg in support of Metrobus workers who have been on strike since April 28.

The Metrobus dispute is over pay grades for more experienced drivers.

According to *Business Day*, the pay negotiations reached deadlock on May 12 when the bus company refused to sign a proposal tabled by the mediator.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact