

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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

## Europe: Saint-Gobain workers protest

The International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) reported June 1 that workers in several European countries were involved in a dispute with glass and building materials manufacturer, Saint-Gobain.

Labour unrest involving French, Spanish, Italian, and other workers at the French MNC Saint-Gobain continued last week. This follows a European-wide protest at Saint-Gobain's head office in Paris on May 20.

ICEM states that the workers are protesting against "further restructuring, which to them means job loss and social dumping." Strikes inside a factory in the Charente region of France have curtailed production and interrupted orders. Workers feel cheated because "efficiency bonuses" have not been paid as promised. Protests have also spread to Vauxrot and Châlon-sur-Saône in France.

In Spain, at Sekurit worksites in Avilés and Arbós, a furnace accident was blamed on "cuts that nobody wants." Spanish unions worry "that research and development in Avilés might be in jeopardy." In Italy, unions in all three federations—FILCEM-CGIL, FEMCA-CISL and ILCM-UIL—jointly protested at Saint-Gobain's regional office in Milan. There was also a joint four-hour work stoppage at Italian plants.

The unions have rejected the company's decision to close a Sekurit plant in Savigliano, northern Italy, halve the workforce at another Cuneo region plant in Cervas and a possible threat to the Flovetto plant in Chieti, central Italy.

## Germany: European Central Bank employees in first-ever strike

On June 3, around 300 staff at the European Central Bank (ECB) staged the first strike in the bank's 10-year history over pay and conditions.

According to AFP, the action, which was called by the ECB's Ipso union (International and European Public Services Organisation), sought to draw attention to workers' demands for better pension rights and to a "democratic deficit" at the bank.

The industrial action, according to *Reuters*, took place the day before "a critical monetary policy meeting," where a 21-person governing council met to decide on interest rates for the 16-country euro area.

Around a fifth of the bank's employees gathered at the foot at the Eurotower, the ECB's headquarters in Frankfurt, carrying banners denouncing ECB President Jean-Claude Trichet.

One ECB staff member said, "The fact is no one likes being treated like shit, and that is what we have been treated like."

Another bank worker said, "This is not about monetary policy, but I really think this is now going to have an effect on monetary policy.... It will impact the information flow in the bank, there are tensions there. People who are angry will not pass information, and it won't go from the bottom up to the top."

Ipso's head, Adrian Petty, stressed, "We do not want to influence (Trichet's) monetary policy, we are only interested in his employment policy."

Ipso states it is seeking redress over a lack of influence in pay and benefit talks. It estimates that recent changes to pension contributions and employment terms, including incentives for early retirement, will reduce benefits as much as 15 percent.

## UK: Fourth day of stoppage by refuse collectors in pay dispute

Bin collectors and street cleaners in Bristol started their fourth strike day in a row over pay, reported the BBC on June 1.

The Unite union is accusing employers Sita of failing to come to a settlement over the dispute.

The workers are demanding a rise of 4 percent but are only being offered a 2.75 percent increase. Pam Jennings of Unite said, "Sita made £16 million last year. All we're asking for is for them to dig into their profits to make that 1.25 percent up."

UK: Welsh auto workers to strike in support of sacked convenor

According to the Unite union's Web site May 28, the union is seeking an urgent meeting with Linamar management after union members voted overwhelmingly to take strike action in support of the plant's sacked convenor, Rob Williams.

Workers at the car components factory, Linamar Automotive Systems based in Swansea, voted by 139 to 19 to take strike action in the secret ballot, on a turnout of over 90 percent.

The online report concluded: "Unite believes that the company's convenor was sacked outside any agreed procedure and without any charge.

"The union is aware that the company is intending to make changes to its employees' terms and conditions in the near future."

## Ireland: Tesco workers to strike

Thousands of workers at almost 30 stores have begun balloting for industrial action that may escalate to the giant retailer's 116 stores across Ireland, reported the Irish *Independent* on May 29.

The largest union at the chain, Mandate, has decided to begin a ballot at over 20 stores where staff have had their workweek cut by up to 10 hours.

A national strike may follow if the retail chain, which employs 13,500 workers, does not rescind the decision on the reduced working weeks.

SIPTU union's national industrial secretary, Gerry McCormick, said there was no justification for the cost-cutting measures as Tesco had a €250 million profit in the Republic of Ireland in the past year.

According to the *Independent*, the union has accused the chain of breaching an agreement that it could not cut hours unless there was a major drop in trade. Tesco said it was within its agreement with the unions to reduce hours.

#### **Italy: Refuse collectors on strike due to unsafe vehicles**

Refuse workers in Palermo, Italy, have been on strike for almost two [TWO WHAT?] because their vehicles do not meet compulsory safety standards. Many break down.

Since May 29, 350 piles of rubbish have been set on fire.

Italy: Refinery workers strike following workplace deaths

Workers at one of Europe's largest refineries in Italy have gone on strike after the latest in a series of fatal workplace accidents, euronews.net reported May 27.

"The victims are thought to have inhaled poisonous gases after becoming trapped in a de-sulfurization unit while carrying out repairs at the plant in the Sardinian port of Cagliari," reported the news site.

One angry worker blamed the deaths on the pressure to increase productivity and cut corners. He said that "the plant should've been shut down for three or four months for this type of maintenance."

Italy reportedly has the worst record for workplace deaths in Europe, with some of the latest figures suggesting one person dies about every seven hours.

Russia: Siberian miners strike over non-payment of wages

According to RIA Novosti, 35 miners in southern Siberia went on strike May 28 demanding the payment of around \$657,000 in wage arrears.

The striking workers are demanding the payment of wages for April and May. Total arrears for wages and benefits have been estimated at around 20.5 million roubles.

The owners of the Yeniseiskaya mine in the Russian republic of Khakassia are planning to suspend operations at the mine and dismiss around 190 workers.

#### **Egypt: Textile workers in open-ended strike**

A thousand workers at Tanta Linen Co. have gone on strike over pay.

The members of the official Textile Trade Union (TTU) are demanding to be paid bonuses on the basis of 2008 wage rate instead of 2003, the accumulated commissions that have been unpaid since the company was sold to a Saudi investor, an increase in the meal compensation to the industry average, a 7 percent regular subsidy, and the rehiring of fired workers.

Despite management's strong line against industrial action in 2006, the workers began their first strike that ended with an agreement to get the late payments. But management ignored the agreement, so the workers went again on strike in September 2007.

The employer refused to fulfil the agreement items and fired some of the workers. In July 2008, the workers went on strike for the third time and management fired nine workers, including two union representatives.

Tanta Linen Co. Workers' prospects have deteriorated since the government sold the company to Saudi investor Abdallah Saleh al-Ka'ki. As part of its privatisation program, the government sold the company for

L.E 83 million paid in three years instalments, though the actual value of the company is reportedly L.E 500 million.

Egypt: Hospital staff strike over pay and allowances

Over 100 employees, including administrative workers, nurses and technicians, at the First Day Surgeries Hospital in Nasr city held a sit-in protest May 28, against the late payment of their wages.

The workers have been waiting three months for their basic wages and night shift allowance to be paid.

Nurse Sabreen Hashim said, "We did not get our night shift allowance or our share in the hospital's profit for the past three months, under the pretext of lack of funds in the hospital."

#### **Nigerian judiciary staff on strike over state interference in union**

On June 1, judiciary staff members in Anambra State, Nigeria, began what has been described as a "stay-at-home" strike to protest against state interference in the affairs of the Judiciary Workers Union of Nigeria (JUSUN).

According to *Daily Independent* (Lagos), the chief justice of Anambra state had in a letter to the JUSUN, "forced the chairman of the union, Basil Mbanefo, and its legal adviser to resign." The union responded by setting a seven-day ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of the letter. When this period expired, the union called a strike.

Nigerian steel worker shot dead by police during protest action

On June 2, Nigerian police fired into a demonstration of steelworkers who were demanding payment of wages owed to them by their employer, the Ajaokuta Steel Company (ASCL). According to *Vanguard*, one worker was killed and several others were injured.

The paper reported that Aminu Shagari, chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Steel, had appealed for calm, telling the workers that "a memo, which contain provision for the sum of N2.6 billion [US\$17.7 million] was already being forwarded to the presidency to upset the indebtedness to them."

The workers were not satisfied with government assurances and set up a roadblock to stop traffic on the Ajaokuta Expressway linking the state capital Lokoja to the east of the country. They carried placards, some of which read, "FG Pay Us Our 10 Months Salaries and Other Outstanding Arrears or Face the Consequences."

The Police Public Relations Officer, Onum Inalegwu, confirmed the incidents. He described the protesting workers as cowardly, insisting that they should have found "a more civilized way of channelling their grievances."

#### **Protesting Ghanaian port workers injured as police intervene**

Work has stopped at the Ghanaian port of Tema since May 28. On that day the 2,679 workers employed there were expecting a referendum to be organized by the Ghana Dock Labour Company Limited (GDLC) to determine which of two unions, Maritime and Dock Workers Union (MDU) and the National Union of Harbour Employees (NUHEM), should have collective bargaining rights at the port.

According to the *Ghanaian Chronicle*, the MDU had represented the workers for a number of years. But last year they left that union and transferred to the NUHEM.

The Department of Labour was called in, and after a series of meetings, it was agreed that a referendum be organized to settle the issue. On April

1, 2008, a letter was sent from the acting Chief Labour Officer to the two unions, announcing the decision.

According to the *Chronicle*, "Executives of the MDU cautioned the Labour Department on its action of authorising the referendum on the grounds that they did not understand the rationale behind the decision, because they had no information on the resignation of members from their union." They insisted on their right to represent all casual workers at the GDLC.

Eventually, the acting Chief Labour Officer ordered the referendum to be conducted on May 28 at the GDLC premises.

Many workers arrived at 5:00 a.m. to make sure they could exercise their right to vote. When no officials turned up to conduct the referendum, they decided not to work if they were not allowed to vote.

The *Chronicle* reported that police were called from the Tema Regional Police Command, with back-up from Police Headquarters in Accra to "ensure that the workers got back to work.... They used water cannons, rubber bullets, tear gas, and even live bullets, to disperse the crowd, leading to some of the workers sustaining various degrees of injury, while others were apprehended by the police sustaining injuries in the process."

J. J. Jebuni, general secretary of NUHEM, told the *Chronicle* that the workers had decided not to return to work until they had been allowed to exercise their franchise as to which union they want to belong.

### **All-out strike action at Nigerian Unity Schools**

Workers at 102 federal government-owned Unity Schools began all-out indefinite strike action on May 28, after negotiations with the government broke down. They are demanding payment of arrears of salaries and allowances owed to them since 2008.

The secretary-general of the Association of Senior Civil Servants of Nigeria, Solomon Onaghinon, told the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) that the schools might become extinct in the near future, unless urgent steps were taken. He said that the strike would continue until government met their demands.

NAN pointed out that between 2007 and 2009, the Unity Schools went on an indefinite strike three times because of workers' welfare issues and the move to privatise the schools.



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