

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

25 September 2009

French postal workers strike against privatisation

Thousands of post office workers across France went on strike September 22 to protest job cuts and government plans to partially privatise the service, according to Reuters.

The Sud-PTT union said in a statement, “This project is an additional step towards a privatisation of the biggest local public service, contrary to declarations by the government and La Poste management.”

The union said 35-40 percent of postal workers had joined the strike, jointly endorsed by the five major trade unions in France.

La Poste, which employs over 250,000 workers, said last year it was considering opening up its capital to private investors and made moves to change its status to that of a limited company. But its plan to raise a proposed three billion euros from selling shares had to be abandoned in light of the global financial crisis.

The government is justifying its moves towards privatisation of the postal service by the need to open up access to new sources of funding and prepare for the deregulation of the postal sector in 2011 under European Union rules—to compete with international rivals such as United Parcel Service and the privatised German post office operator, Deutsche Post.

Spain’s Opel workers threaten strikes over job losses

The Associated Press reported September 20 that workers have threatened to take industrial action if large-scale job cuts hit a car plant in central Spain, after thousands protested General Motors’ (GM) sale of its European brand Opel to Canadian company Magna International.

On September 19, thousands of protesters filled Zaragoza’s central Paseo de la Independencia calling on GM, its German subsidiary company, and Magna to save the Spanish factory from job losses. Magna has said up to 10,500 Opel jobs in

Europe could be cut and some production at Zaragoza moved to Eisenach, in Germany.

Irish food company attempts to break strike

Green Isle Foods has begun moving in scabs against picketing strikers at its plant in Naas, 30 kilometres from Dublin, reported the *Leinster Leader*, September 23.

Thirty-five workers and members of the Technical, Engineering and Electrical Union (TEEU) at the plant are in their fourth week on strike. The workers, fitters and electricians claim the dispute arose when an email was distributed about redundancy proposals. There have been angry scenes at the picket lines between contractors being bussed into Green Isle to scab on the picketers.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions last week granted an all-out picket on the plant, which was established September 17. Green Isle is calling the action illegal. It says that there are SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Professional & Technical Union—Ireland’s largest union) workers in the plant who have not been balloted on industrial action, which makes the strike invalid.

SIPTU refuses to confirm or deny that members of the Green Isle plant belong to its union. Thirty contract workers are being housed in the luxury Killashee House Hotel on the outskirts of Naas and are brought in for their shifts by a local bus company. Local people have dropped food supplies and newspapers for the picketing strikers.

Irish airline workers to strike over pension shortfall

According to the September 21 *Irish Independent*, a “major strike is looming at Aer Lingus over a massive €350 m pension scheme shortfall that is greater than the value of the airline.”

Management has refused to bridge the huge hole in the Irish Airlines Superannuation Scheme. This is on top of pay cuts for

staff, recently announced by the airlines' chairman, Colm Barrington.

In a new report, seen by the *Independent*, the main union at Aer Lingus estimates the pension deficit currently stands at between €357 million and €385 million. Earlier this month, Aer Lingus' market capitalisation fell to just €313 million.

SIPTU civil aviation sectoral organiser, Dermot O'Loughlin, told the *Irish Independent*, "This is one of the highest deficits seen in a scheme so far and Aer Lingus doesn't seem to realise the consequences of saying it will not contribute anything more."

Israeli water workers strike over unpaid work

On September 21 220 Israeli Water Authority workers went on a "warning strike," claiming that the government imposed structural changes in the water sector without consultation and without paying workers for them.

Workers say that the structural changes doubled their workload and should lead to extra remuneration. As part of the strike, workers refrained from regulation of water consumers and watering of gardens. Licenses were not issued for farmers and local authorities.

Nigerian college teachers' strike delays start of term

In the face of government plans to sell off the state-owned Unity Colleges, Nigerian teachers at all Federal Government Colleges are taking strike action. They are demanding the resumption of Junior Secondary School (JSS) classes, payment of 15 percent salary arrears and payment of a transfer allowance owed to them since September 2008.

Staff at the 104 colleges began their action in March 2009, but the union suspended it on June 2 after the government promised to meet the strikers' demands.

With the new school year starting, the governments' failure to keep its promises has led to the resumption of the strike.

Secretary General of the Association of Senior Civil Servants of Nigeria (ASCSN), Solomon Onaghinon, said he regretted the government's agenda to sell the schools with their vast expanse of land, and condemned the fact that staff salaries were being withheld without due process.

Strike at Murtala Muhammed International Airport, Nigeria

Airport workers at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport (MMIA) in Lagos struck on September 23 against the privatization of the General Aviation Terminal (GAT). The terminal was previously operated by the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria (FAAN).

Workers from three aviation industry unions (Air Transport Services Senior Staff Association of Nigeria, National Union of Air Transport Employees, and the National Union of Pensioners) protested in the airport's main thoroughfares chanting slogans opposing the handover of the terminal to Nigeria-based Bi-Courtney Aviation Services Limited (BASL).

The workers are concerned that the sell-off will result in job losses and other changes. BASL took control of the terminal last weekend and has stated that no job cuts are intended. Aviation Minister Babatunde Omotoba flew into Lagos on September 22 from the capital city of Abuja to appeal for the workers to call off the action.

South African clothing workers continue their strike

Around 55,000 South African clothing workers have rejected management's claim to have revised their pay offer, and are continuing with their strike. The workers belong to the SA Clothing and Textile Workers' Union.

SACTWU said that the latest offer was "word for word the same" as an offer made three weeks ago. National organising secretary Chris Gina stated that the legal minimum wage for a qualified machinist was R399 (US\$53.80) per week, but in some clothing factories in Isithebe, Botshabelo and Qwaqwa, machinists are earning only R126 (US\$17) a week.

It was claimed the products made in these areas were being bought by retailers including Edgars, Pep Stores, Woolworths, and Mr Price. However, these retailers denied sourcing their products from sweat shops. SACTWU is now backing the arbitration service, the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration as an intermediary in talks with management.



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