Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

10 January 2002

Italian air traffic controllers continue dispute

On January 8 an Italian air traffic controllers strike paralysed airports nationally. The strike started at started at midnight and ended 16 hours later. Several unions called the action, as part of a protest campaign against government proposals to change the labour laws. Under the proposed new legislation it would be easier for employers to lay-off and sack certain categories of workers.

The action led to airlines cancelling many flights and delaying others. At Rome's Fiumicino hub, the majority of national and foreign airlines were forced to cancel or re-schedule flights.

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States there has been a general slump in the airline industry and workers in Italy fear that thousands of jobs will be lost without government support. A further eight-hour strike is to be held by airport workers on January 18 to demand further government subsidies for the industry. That action is to be followed by an air controller's strike at Milan airports on January 29. On January 30, a general strike of all transport workers is to be held between 10:00am and 2:00pm.

Bank staff in Yugoslavia protest massive job losses

This week bank staff, employed at the four largest banks in Yugoslavia, began a series of sit-ins around the country to protest against a possible 8,500 job losses following a decision to shut down the banks.

On January 5, more than 1,000 employees locked themselves in the banks' offices in a number of cities and stated that they would remain there until a decision was made to reverse the closures. Some 500 workers of the Beobanka and a further 400 employees of the Beogradska Banka and Investbanka held sit-in protests at the banks' headquarters in Belgrade. Sit-in protests were also held in the cities of Krusevac, Nis and Vranje.

In the last weeks the government put $17 million (£11.75m) into the banks as part of a rescue attempt, which ended in failure. The decision to close the banks is tied in with the launch of a World Bank-sponsored reform of Yugoslavia's financial services. The bank closures are the largest corporate closures overseen by the government so far in Yugoslavia.

Trade unions involved in the dispute have stated that for every 1,000 employees laid-off, another 5,000 related jobs could be lost. The proposed closure of the banks comes at a time when unofficial estimates cite a rate of more than 50 percent jobless. Following the sit-ins, Yugoslav President, Vojislav Kostunica, met with the Serbian Finance Minister Bozidar Djelic and the Yugoslav Central Bank Governor Mladjan Dinkic to discuss the crisis.

French doctors strike over fees

French doctors took nationwide strike to demand higher pay from the government. The doctors are demanding an increase in the fees that are charged to patients and the strike has resulted in the closure of many medical centres.

Public sector doctors, whose consultation fees are reimbursed under state healthcare arrangements, currently charge up to 115 francs (£10.70) for an office visit and 135 francs (£12.55) for a home visit. Private doctors' fees can be more than triple these amounts. Doctors are demanding a 14-percent increase in the office fees the government allows public sector doctors to charge and are calling for a 46 percent increase in home visit fees.

The latest strike lasted until January 7 and involved some by 55,000 general practitioners. During the strike the previous week the government requisitioned 5,000 doctors to provide medical services. This was the first time such action had been taken by the government since World War Two.

It has been reported that public doctors in parts of France have already increased their fees for office visits to $18 in the last several days. This was in defiance of lower fees set in place by the state health insurance agency CNAM.

The agency has claimed that it wishes to negotiate with the unions involved in the dispute. The unions have stated that they will not negotiate unless the government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin is directly involved in the talks.

Liberian radio workers threatened for forming union

The newly formed Liberian Broadcasting System Workers' Association, set up by workers at the state-owned LBS, has been declared unconstitutional by the Liberian Ministry of Labour because it has not obtained a "certificate of recognition" as a collective bargaining agent from the government.

According to a letter sent January 5 from the Labour Ministry to Bockarie Moussa, President of the LBS Workers' Association, the organisation has not been officially recognised as a trade union and it therefore risks prosecution should it begin to act as one. The letter advised the organisation to obtain official recognition before taking on such responsibilities. It states, "Pending your compliance with the Labour Law of Liberia, any action taken under the guise of the aforementioned association is illegal and may submit to your prosecution."

The LBS workers are in dispute with the management over their salaries, which have not been paid for the past 11 months.

Courts stop Kenyan workers' split from official union

Workers in the Kenyan tea industry have been prevented by the High Court from quitting the Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union and forming a breakaway. Officials of the proposed union had appealed to the High Court against the decision, made in 1998 by the Registrar of Trade Unions, that prevented the formation of the new Kenya Tea Workers Union.

In upholding the original decision, the two judges at the High Court, Sheikh Amin and Richard Kuloba, said the officials had failed to prove that the formation of the proposed union was the only road open to them. "If it is a matter of self-ego driving some persons to over-rate themselves into thinking that they can provide better leadership, that is not a consideration for the registrar or the court," the judges stated.

Hotel workers strike in South Africa

One hundred and twelve members of the SA Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union (Saccawu), have been on strike at the Hilton International Hotel in Sandton, South Africa, since December 24. The strikers are demanding a wage increase of R400 across the board, an extra months pay cheque and a minimum salary of R2000. Other demands included 31 days annual leave and nine months maternity leave, of which six should be on full pay. They also want union recognition and organisational rights. Workers currently get paid nothing extra for working on public holidays or for overtime. It is the first strike at the hotel since it was built in 1997. Operations at the five-star hotel have been virtually halted by the strike, with guests having to pack their bags and leave.

Saccawu has been negotiating with management for the past three years and took the dispute to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). Management [had] refused to sign a collective agreement, but after the CCMA hearing, it changed its position. Later, however, the management used the resignation of the hotel's general manager to back out of the agreement.

At least 500 union members are expected to march to the hotel on January 11 to hand over a memorandum to the general manager.

Nigerian Airways sacks one thousand

Nigerian Airways announced last week that it is to sack a thousand of its 2,300 employees, in what it describes as a "major right-sizing exercise" prior to privatisation. A government committee set up to prepare for privatisation recommended the mass layoffs last year. The sackings are a last ditch attempt by the government to revive the company before privatisation. With only two left of the fleet of 30 aircraft in the 1980s, Nigerian Airways has precious little to sell off.