

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

3 June 2005

Europe

BBC dispute could continue, further strikes threatened

The National Union of Journalists, the technical union BECTU and Amicus are again threatening a strike over 4,000 planned job cuts.

The unions called off a planned strike on May 31 and June 1 last week, after the BBC agreed there would be a one-year moratorium on compulsory redundancies, that the sale of BBC Resources would be postponed for two years, and that pension and benefits would be guaranteed for staff at BBC Broadcast if it is sold off.

The unions are demanding a meeting with BBC Director-General Mark Thompson, stating that while they welcome the commitment to postpone privatisation of BBC resources, management has not gone far enough to avoid compulsory redundancies. Thompson sent out an e-mail to BBC staff last week stating that there was no room for further negotiations.

National Union of Journalists General Secretary Jeremy Dear said, "There is too much at stake for us to compromise the future of the BBC. We are determined to ensure that the BBC is not dismantled in this reckless fashion."

BECTU Assistant General Secretary Gerry Morrissey said, "There is still a significant gap between the unions and the BBC, which we hope will be bridged by divisional-level talks on the details of the cuts. If not, there will be renewed industrial action."

The BBC has short-listed four bidders for the sale of its BBC Broadcast business, including Apax Partners, where former BBC Director-General Greg Dyke is an advisor, and French manufacturing company Thomson/Technicolor.

British journalists threaten strike over pay and redundancies

Journalists voted in favour of strike action at two of Britain's biggest newspaper groups.

Staff at Trinity Mirror's *Coventry Evening Telegraph* and its associated weeklies rejected a 2.75 percent pay offer plus £200 a year on minimum pay bands.

The National Union of Journalists is seeking a minimum wage rate of £14,500 for reporters on the weekly papers and £19,000 on the daily. Management has offered £14,000 and £18,800.

Staff at Newsquest's *Southern Daily Echo* have threatened to strike over plans to cut eight editorial jobs. However, they agreed to a new pay-banding scheme that brings the rate for senior feature writers and journalists to £20,036.

Strikes are also possible at Newsquest titles, the *Oxford Mail* and the *South London Guardian*, after journalists rejected pay offers of 3 percent. Demanding a London-weighting, David Tilley, father of the chapel (shop steward) at the *Guardian*, said, "We've got trainee reporters who tell me they can't afford some days to even get the train into work in the morning. Try living on £14,000 in London; it's bad enough in somewhere like Darlington."

UK: Bradford council IT staff ballot for strike

Local Authority IT workers in Bradford council are being balloted

for strike action, after the head of the local authority admitted a £160 million outsourcing deal will lead to redundancies.

Unison said that the council has broken promises made during earlier contract negotiations that there would be no job losses as a result of the Bradford-i outsourcing project, which affects 105 IT staff. At least 22 jobs will be lost and a further 40 affected by the takeover by Serco, which earlier this year acquired ITNet, the preferred bidder for the Bradford-i scheme.

The strike ballot will be completed by June 10. Unison Regional Secretary Chris Jenkinson said the contract was to have been signed on May 19, but the union was told just days beforehand that between 25 and 35 jobs could be lost. Unison's negotiator Patrick Kerry said, "Industrial action could commence as early as 18 June and could escalate to other areas of the council. We feel the council and Serco have acted in bad faith. Staff are disappointed, especially after reaching the original agreement."

The union wants guarantees on jobs or severance packages for staff.

UK: lecturers' pay dispute continues

The lecturers' union NATFHE has called for an intervention by the arbitration service ACAS in order to bring an end to ongoing industrial action over pay.

The pay dispute is over the failure of colleges up and down the country to implement an agreed pay rise of 8 percent over two years that was meant to go part-way towards narrowing the pay-level gap between the Further Education and Higher Education sector.

NATFHE members at Newcastle College have held seven days of strikes, and the union has backed strike ballots in a further 13 Further Education colleges.

Italy: strikes on public transport

A public transport strike in Italy on March 31 hit buses, trams and underground rail services in Rome and other major cities such as Turin and Milan. Metal workers are to strike for 10 hours from June 17 over new contracts. Strikes could also affect civil servants in contract discussions.

Ireland: Polish workers at Dublin Port tunnel take unofficial action

Around 40 Polish nationals working on the Dublin Port Tunnel struck in protest at alleged underpayment and an ultimatum to quit their trade union or be sacked.

The general union SIPTU said it had been trying to get the men's employer to conform to Irish labour laws and construction industry rates of pay for four months, but without success. The Polish workers were being underpaid by around 25 percent and had been asked to sign an agreement to quit the union. When they refused, they were sacked. They responded by mounting an unofficial picket.

Ireland: efforts to prevent Rye Valley Foods strike

Talks were held June 2 in an attempt to avert planned strike action at the Rye Valley Foods plant in Carrickmacross, County Monaghan.

The Technical, Engineering and Electrical Union, which represents

30 of the factory's 700 workers, has served strike notice on the plant to take place from June 13. The union said that management has ordered workers to take a compulsory week-long leave on that date or face a week's layoff.

Rye Valley Foods makes pre-packed meals for major supermarket chains.

Netherlands bus strike

City buses stopped operating on Wednesday, June 1, in Utrecht as 120 drivers for the transport authority GVU went on strike.

The drivers are protesting stalled talks over a new collective labour agreement for municipal public servants.

Africa

Congolese telecom workers strike to force payment of arrears

The streets of Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of Congo, have been ringing with the noise of 1,200 or more telecom workers, who have been mounting lively protests since May 24, to highlight their plight since their employer company was privatised.

Their employer, La Société des télécommunications du Congo (SOTELCO), was privatised in 2002 (although the government is still the sole stockholder). Since then, workers have not been dismissed, but neither have they been paid.

Those demonstrating have been using metal implements as well as their voices to make their presence heard. "We are prepared to keep demonstrating even in torrential rains until the government listens and resolves our situation," a female demonstrator told IRIN on May 27.

The workers are owed 43 months of salary arrears and say they will continue their protest unless they are paid at least two months of their salaries.

The government owes salary arrears to many of its workers, in some cases from as far back as 1995. The total sum is now estimated to be 187.6 billion CFA francs (US\$361 million). In 2004, however, the government paid off only one month's worth of this debt owed to its workforce.

One protester complained: "My six children have been thrown out of private school because I cannot pay, and now I am even indebted to the government school. But when will the government debt be paid to me?"

The Republic of Congo is now a significant oil producer earning a surplus of 136.3 billion CFA francs (US \$262 million) in 2004 from petroleum sales. The workers say that high oil prices mean the government can now afford to pay the arrears.

South Africa: striking auto component workers replaced by contractors

More than 700 striking workers have been served with dismissal notices at the Kromberg-Schubert auto component factory in Brits, South Africa. An article by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) on May 26 reported that the company had already hired new contract workers to take the jobs of those on strike, who are members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA).

The strike began on May 23, after the required 48 hours' notice period had been given. The workers' demands are for an increase of between 1 and 5 rand (between US\$0.15 and \$0.74) per hour for shift workers, improvements to the transport policy and an end to racist and unfair practices by management. More than 100 allegedly unfair dismissals have been made since 1998, many of which are awaiting a decision by the Council for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration.

Elizabeth Khumo, a representative of the strikers, told the SABC, "We have four gates that we have to use before we can go outside to

use the toilets. Although there are toilets inside, only the whites are supposed to use them. They don't have to clock out to go outside."

In spite of the dismissal notices and the hiring of replacements, the workers have resolved to continue their action until they win their demands.

Firefighters accused of taking "illegal" action in Durban

Firefighters in Durban, South Africa, are being accused by their management of taking illegal strike action by booking off sick or taking compassionate leave in large numbers. Durban City Manager Michael Sutcliffe claimed that the firefighters were in contravention of labour legislation, which does not allow essential services workers to take industrial action. "The form of action that has been instituted is that of booking off sick en masse," he claimed, alleging that out of a day shift of 96 there were 43 absences. "We believe there may be a link with discussions we are currently holding with their labour representatives." Two fire stations had to be closed down during the night shift.

COSATU promises "rolling mass action" against job losses

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is planning a national strike on June 27 to protest against job losses and high unemployment. It will be followed by protests every month until next January, with a mass rally in December celebrating COSATU's 20th anniversary.

COSATU Secretary General Zwelinzima Vavi says that more than 10,000 jobs have been lost since January, and 30,000 more are under threat as companies continue to shed jobs, partly as a result of the strong rand. The unemployment rate in the country now stands at 40 percent.

The National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) had declared a deadlock in negotiations between employers and unions, according to Vavi.

Vavi protested at the ANC discussion document released last week proposing amendments to labour laws. The document proposes lifting labour law restrictions for certain categories of workers to encourage the growth of low-paid jobs.

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