

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

28 October 2005

## Europe

### Workers in Charleroi, Belgium strike

Workers in the southern Belgian city of Charleroi staged a 24-hour strike October 24 to protest government plans to raise the age for early retirement from 58 to 60. The stoppage was called by a number of trade unions and is the precursor to nationwide industrial action due to take place on October 28. Talks between the government and unions on changes to the pension system broke down two weeks ago.

The day of action involved employees from all sectors including public transport, education and hospital workers. The strike also hit Charleroi airport, which is the European hub of the Irish budget airline Ryanair. The airline announced that it had cancelled flights due to the strike.

Charleroi has very high rates of unemployment and was once a centre of Belgium's steel and coal industries.

### German chip manufacturing workers continue protests

On October 24, 400 striking workers at the microchip manufacturer Infineon in Germany demonstrated outside the firm's Munich factory. The workers are protesting the planned closure of the plant due to take place in 2007, which will cost 800 jobs.

Infineon announced in February that it would close the 20-year-old plant, stating that it would be too costly to modernise and was unsuitable for modern production. Infineon is Europe's largest manufacturer of microchips. Employees from German truck maker MAN and engineering conglomerate Siemens as well as auto workers from BMW and Volkswagen's Audi also supported the demonstration by sending delegations.

Workers chanted slogans such as "We will stay here, that is what we fight for." The strike began following the breakdown of negotiations between the union IG Metall and Infineon earlier this month. The union stated

this week that its intention was to use the strike as a bargaining chip to resume negotiations.

### Teachers strike at schools in Stoke-on-Trent, England

On October 20, teachers at three schools in Stoke-on-Trent struck for the second time in two weeks in a dispute over pay. The teachers are employed at Trentham High, Holden Lane High and St. Peter's High and are members of the NASUWT trade union.

Since July, four days of strike action have been staged at Trentham High and Holden Lane High, and three days of strike action at St. Peter's.

The dispute between the teachers and Stoke-on-Trent City Council began three months ago and is centred on the issue of performance-related pay. The NASUWT claims that the schools have breached a "national agreement on pay progression and until they acknowledge that breach, we cannot move forward." Further industrial action is planned for November pending the resolution of the dispute.

### Student nurses at hospital in Dublin stage sit-in protest

Student nurses at St. James's Hospital in Dublin, Ireland, held a sit-in protest October 21 to protest a management policy requiring them to pay for their own injections against hepatitis B and tuberculosis. The nurses are members of the Irish Nurses Organisation.

The dispute began when 60 student nurses turned up for their immunisation against hepatitis B and TB and were then refused because they were not able to pay a €100 fee.

At other Dublin hospitals such as Tallaght and the Mater, student nurses are not charged for the vaccination. The majority of the students live on very low incomes, as they receive no pay and are entitled to a grant of just €5,000 a year.

The hospital attempted to justify the payment of the injections on the basis that the students are not employees and are required to be immunised before

being allowed to train on the hospital grounds. The Department of Health body concerned, the Health Service Executive, stated that it was for each hospital to decide whether or not it charged student nurses for vaccinations.

## **Africa**

### **Oil workers on strike in Mauritania after sackings**

Workers in the oil and gas sector in Mauritania have been on strike since October 14, over the sacking of 16 trade unionists by a transport subcontractor.

The workers are members of the Energy and Petroleum Workers Union of Mauritania. Ten of the sacked workers had been due to stand for union elections scheduled for November 1.

El Majabaat El Koubra Tours is a subcontractor providing travel and logistics services to Woodside Petroleum Limited, which is based in Australia. Woodside is involved in several offshore deepwater drilling ventures off Mauritania for the extraction of oil reserves of around 700 million barrels.

### **Namibian local government workers protest over low wages**

Local government workers in the Namibian town of Luederitz held a protest outside their workplace October 24 to demand an improved pay offer. While their employers have offered 3.5 percent, the workers are demanding 5 percent, as well as an end to annual delays in their salary increases.

The workers have also been angered by the way that the top managers circumvented the usual method of agreeing salary increases, and awarded themselves N\$24,637 (US\$3,671) of the N\$304,717 (US\$45,397) available for all salary increases.

In a separate development in Namibia, workers at Ramatex Textiles Namibia—based in Windhoek—have been told they are banned from speaking to the media. The company has also said that any strike launched before a dispute procedure had been completed would be treated as illegal and the strikers would be faced with dismissal.

### **Dispute continues at University of Limpopo, South Africa**

About 450 non-teaching staff have been on strike at the University of Limpopo since October 6 over demands for a 12 percent pay increase. The workers who make up 50 percent of the total workforce at the university are members of the National Education,

Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu). The dispute hit the headlines in South Africa last week when the strikers rounded up the vice chancellor and senior members of staff and escorted them off the campus.

Talks are continuing to resolve the dispute after the university took out an interdict against Nehawu to stop further incidents. Nehawu chairperson Robert Bopape said, “We are expecting something from them [the University] so that we can end the strike. If they can’t offer anything they are in trouble.”



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