

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

3 August 2007

Russian auto workers take strike action

Several hundred workers at the state-controlled automotive plant OAO AvtoVAZ, took strike action for a few hours on Wednesday. The plant, situated at the city of Togliatti on the River Volga, produces the well-known Lada vehicles that used to dominate the Russian market. It is believed to be the first strike in the plant's history.

The strikers are members of the independent Yedinstvo trade union that has 1,500 members at the plant. According to the Associated Press, the union had hoped to rally at least 10,000 of the 110,000 workers at the plant for strike action. A Yedinstvo official said that around 300 to 400 people stopped work and were on the street, "surrounded by police and company security." The union is demanding a wage of 25,000 rubles (US\$980) a month, three times the minimum wage.

AvtoVAZ spokesman Ivan Skrylnik said, "We consider it [the strike] to be in contravention of the law." He said that present average wages at the plant are 14,000 rubles (US\$550) a month. A press statement issued by the company claimed that "certain political forces" were behind the strike and that reforms were under way that would improve working conditions.

AvtoVAZ's official trade union, representing 100,000 workers at the plant, opposed the strike action. Its spokesman said that official wage negotiations were ongoing.

According to the *Moscow Times*, the week before the strike Yedinstvo activist Anton Vechkunin was arrested and held for three days for "resisting a police officer." The police said the arrest was for "small-scale hooliganism" and denied it was connected with his union activities. Another Yedinstvo activist was arrested for trying to enter the AvtoVAZ compound and his leaflets calling for strike action were confiscated.

AvtoVAZ announced last month that it was reducing its workforce by 1.5 percent in order to increase

efficiency.

British postal workers dispute continues

Postal workers throughout the United Kingdom are to take a further two weeks of strike action beginning next week against Royal Mail, according to the Communication Workers Union (CWU). They have just finished two weeks of staggered 24-hour stoppages over the state postal service's offer of a 2.5 percent pay rise and plans to cut some 40,000 jobs and close post offices.

According to the union, more than 98 percent of staff took part in current the strike action. CWU leaders are asking for Royal Mail management to "come and negotiate seriously." The union supports "modernisation," but claims it can be introduced without job cuts and by "working together to face up to the challenges of competition."

Unofficial strike action took place in Scotland when postal workers in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen walked out in protest. According to local CWU officials, men were asked to sort mail that it had been agreed management should handle during the official 24-hour strike. When they refused they were suspended, leading to the dispute. Royal Mail warned the public not to use the postal service in Central Scotland.

Namibia: miners strike over union representative sacking

Some 200 workers have gone on unofficial strike over the sacking of their local union leader at the Exxaro Rosh Pinah zinc and lead mine in the south of Namibia. They are demanding the immediate reinstatement of the local branch chairman of the Mineworkers' Union of Namibia, Petrus Amakali, as well as the removal of the company's general manager, Christo Aspeling.

The strikers claim that Aspeling fabricated misconduct charges against Amakali, including "insubordination, instigation of fellow workers, violent

behaviour and possession of a traditional knife at the workplace.” Amakali denies the charges and claims that normal disciplinary procedures had not been followed.

Kondja Kaulinge, the mine’s human resources manager, said that reinstatement was out of the question and called on the men to suspend their “illegal” action and appeal against the dismissal through official channels. “Our economy is heavily affected by unwarranted industrial actions,” he said.

More wages strikes in South Africa

Around 4,000 of 6,000 workers in the tyre industry in South Africa have been on strike for the last two weeks. Negotiations have stalled between their union, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), and employers after the latter refused to increase a 7.5 percent pay offer. NUMSA are demanding a 10 percent across-the-board increase. All six tyre manufacturing plants in Port Elizabeth, KwaZulu Natal and the Northwest were affected, with South African automotive manufacturers such as Toyota and General Motors introducing short-time working as a result of tyre shortages.

Up to 20,000 workers belonging to the Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers’ Union began indefinite strike action this week. Again, a 10 percent across-the-board pay raise is demanded by the union.

The strikes are hitting a range of industries, including packaging, which will affect pharmaceuticals, industrial chemicals, building materials and glass suppliers. The union has held off taking action in the petroleum sector, which could close down fuel supplies, whilst they considered a new wage offer of 8 percent for this sector.



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