

# Workers struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

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## **British junior doctors' body votes to discuss national strike**

Over 34,000 junior doctors in Britain could take strike action over pay and conditions, following a vote by the junior doctors' committee of the British Medical Association (BMA). On March 20 the committee voted without opposition to develop discussion on a national strike or other forms of industrial action.

Although legislation was introduced in 1991 to limit junior doctors' working hours to 56 hours a week, one in six still exceeds the maximum. Andrew Hobart, the chairman of the junior doctors committee, said, "It is demoralising for a junior doctor to be making life-and-death decisions whilst not getting adequate rest, food or decent working and living conditions, all at half pay."

Last month doctors were awarded a 3.5 percent rise in the government's pay review, but it refused to grant extra payments to doctors who have to work more than 56 hours a week. The National Health Service legislates that hours of work beyond 40 a week are paid at less than the standard rate. The BMA says this means juniors can earn as little as £4.02 an hour.

## **German insurance unions agree to pay settlement with employers**

On March 20 German insurance industry employers and the trade unions represented in the industry agreed to a 3.2 percent wage increase, to take affect from April 1. The contract is valid for the next year. The HBV trade, banking and insurance workers union and the DAG white-collar workers' union negotiated the deal, which affects over 220,000 workers.

The deal follows "warning strikes" last week by thousands of insurance workers in several towns and cities. As part of the agreement, workers are to be

granted a 350 mark (\$195) one-off payment for the period between January and March.

## **German bank workers strike and demonstrate for better pay**

Germany's banking sector workers took strike action in Frankfurt, the financial capital of the country, on March 19. The strike was part of a campaign to demand an increase in pay for 470,000 workers in the industry. Over 5,000 bank employees walked off the job and marched through the centre of Frankfurt.

The workers are represented by the DAG white-collar workers union and the HBV trade, banking and insurance workers union. The unions have made a pay claim of 6 to 6.5 percent. The DAG and HBV are also calling on employers to halt plans to end the guaranteed annual bonus and beginning Saturday working hours with no extra pay. Banking employers have offered a pay increase of just 2.3 percent for the next year.

Addressing the Frankfurt demonstration, HBV negotiator Klaus Carlin said the "Deutsche Bank announces a 300 percent rise in profit and for employees every mark is too many". Demonstrations were also due to take place in Berlin, Hamburg and Mainz.

The previous day 4,000 bank workers stopped work at 150 branches in western Germany, and about 3,000 insurance employees took part in strikes in Hamburg, Düsseldorf and Munich.

On March 18, the Deutsche Bank announced that net profits in 1998 trebled to 3.4 billion marks (\$1.90 billion) whilst operating profits in the first two months of this year were more than 1 billion marks.

## **Ukrainian coal miners strike to demand unpaid wages**

On March 18 thousands of Ukrainian coal miners struck for 24 hours to demand months of unpaid wages equivalent to \$665 million.

A demonstration of thousands of miners from the region was held in Donetsk. Leonid Davydov, the head of the Coal Industry Workers' Trade Union in Donetsk, said, "Our task is to show our government our power and force them to pay salary arrears worth 2.5 billion hryvnias [\$665 million]. There is huge pressure from regional leaders and coal ministry authorities who are doing everything possible to stop the protest."

The previous day a metro worker in the Russian Urals city of Yekaterinburg killed himself after receiving no wages for months. A fellow worker, Leonid Sevastyanov, said, "Today our driver Rifat Gafarov committed suicide. Two children and a wife, who does not work, survive him." Both workers had taken part in a strike by 250 workers earlier last week to protest the nonpayment of wages for 11 months.

### **Israeli teachers demand wage increase, other improvements**

After three years of erosion in working conditions and constant cuts in education budgets, the Israeli teachers union held a "warning" strike on March 23. Teachers left school after 10 a.m. The secretary of the teachers union, Avraham Ben-Shabbat, declared that if meetings with the treasury representatives did not produce a satisfactory result all teachers would take unlimited strike action after the Passover vacation, starting this week. The teachers are demanding a 9 percent wage increase, as well as improvements in physical conditions in classes and the reduction of pupil-to-teacher ratios.

### **Nigerian doctors strike**

Hospital doctors in Nigeria have been on strike since February 16 in protest at the federal government's refusal to upgrade their allowances. The dispute goes back as far as August of last year, when a review of public officers in the employment of the federal government took place. The wages of general practitioners were upgraded, but hospital doctors were left out. Hospital doctors work alongside consultants, who also received the allowances. They demanded a harmonised salary structure for all doctors in the health ministry.

Consultants, who up until now have maintained a skeleton service, are threatening to strike in solidarity with their colleagues. A spokesman for the consultants said they feel they have been "humiliated and betrayed by the Federal Minister of Health before our younger

colleagues in the National Association of Resident Doctors [NARD]". He went on to pledge support for hospital doctors, resolving "not to provide patient care services in the absence of NARD members". Previously the consultants had put pressure on the doctors to return to work.



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