

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

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UK teachers union delegates agree to hold strike ballot

On April 23, delegates at the National Union of Teachers (NUT) conference called for a ballot to agree industrial action in protest at the government's plans to introduce performance related pay. Government proposals will link elements of teachers' pay to their pupils' results in national tests and exams. The union will now ballot its 175,000 members in England and Wales about boycotting the pilot scheme in advance of the full implementation of the new system.

The chairman of the Local Government Association's (LGA) education committee, Graham Lane, said that teachers who go on strike would face recriminations. The LGA is responsible for the 150 Local Education Authorities in England. These employ most of the 450,000 classroom teachers in the country.

Lane said, "If they withdraw their labour, we will deduct money from their pay for as long as they refuse to work. It is the duty of employers to deduct pay from people who break their contracts, and we will have no hesitation in doing so. If people take industrial action of any sort, they will have to accept the consequences. We could not allow people to break their contracts without doing something about it." He said that teachers who are contracted to work 195 days a year would face having a sum deducted from the wages for each day lost due to industrial action.

The ballot will be completed by the end of the first week in May and the result is expected to show a majority in favour of taking industrial action.

In a bid to halt strike action, the government has enlisted several ministers to negotiate with the three main teaching unions and the two head teachers' organisations.

London electricians begin overtime ban

Electricians working on the £220 million refurbishment of the Royal Opera House in London have begun an overtime ban in protest at management's refusal to honour a contract. The workers claim that they signed a contract on the basis that the work would be finished in December--in time for the Millennium celebrations.

According to the workers, their contractor, Balfour Kilpatrick, agreed to pay them a guaranteed 10 hours extra pay

per week. They claim that management have gone back on the terms of the agreement.

One electrician at the site said, "The company needs to come up with a new deal and new incentives to get this project moving and a termination payment would be a good start." The same worker said that a company representative had come to the site and "told us the Opera House was not like the Millennium Dome. He said there was no extra money and it wasn't important if we didn't finish on time."

The Electricians have warned that if management does not adhere to the contract, then they could take strike action.

Romanian unions and government agree deal to halt planned strike

Romanian trade unions postponed a general strike due to begin on April 26. The action was called off following a meeting of the four main unions and the government of Prime Minister Radu Vasile.

A government spokeswoman reported that the weekly cabinet meeting had supported a five-page agreement reached during negotiations between Vasile and the unions. The government has agreed to implement some demands raised by the trade unions, including the future indexation of wages to prices, a new legal framework for labour laws, and the establishment of a "social fund".

The agreement follows a warning strike last week in which the unions said 2 million workers participated. The unions have threatened to call more strikes next month if the government reneges on its promises.

International journalists' union protests bombing of Serbian TV station

The Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists issued a statement on April 23, stating their opposition to NATO's bombing of the Serbian state television building in Belgrade.

IFJ General-Secretary Aidan White said, "This bomb attack seems to make a very clear statement that civilian and particularly media targets are legitimate. The rules of the game seem to have been changed over the last few days and that's very dangerous."

The Federation represents 450,000 journalists around the world.

Strike threat in Czech Republic

About 700 workers demonstrated in front of the headquarters of the CKD locomotives firm in Prague Wednesday, after not receiving their wages for two months. The firm is deeply in debt and there is strong suspicion that after its privatisation five years ago its owners transferred all valuable assets to their other private firms.

Workers are demanding re-nationalisation of the factory without compensation to its current owners and its inclusion in a "revitalisation" program of the government. (This program seeks to keep large firms afloat and save some jobs by greatly reducing salaries and benefits, sacking part of the work force and then selling the balance of the company to Western multinationals.) In the case of CKD, sources speak of the interest of Siemens in taking over former CKD markets in Russia and Eastern Europe and changing local plants into assembly lines employing cheap labour. A demand to put the revitalisation plan under workers control in the interest of saving jobs has also emerged as a minority current in the trade union discussions.

Following a strike threat last November, management succeeded in obtaining bank loans in order to pay workers' wages.

Meanwhile, plans were announced to close the Koh-i-noor mine in the north Bohemian coal region, threatening 2,000 miners' jobs. The reaction among the miners to the news was described as "explosive". Unemployment in the region is already close to 20 percent, compared to 9.3 percent in the Czech Republic as a whole.

Israeli trade union prepares to sack hundreds of workers

The Israeli trade union federation Histadrut said on April 25 that it would lay off 450 of its staff after the general election later this year. The cuts will be implemented by December 1999. The leader of the labour committee, Bracha Siegelman, which represents the workers, met Histadrut chairman Yaakov Shamay and agreed to carry out the redundancies as part of a cost cutting exercise.

The agreement has not been finalised, as the union is trying to secure a loan from the banks to raise the money it needs to compensate the sacked workers.

The committee has accepted the job losses on the basis that workers are to receive enhanced redundancy terms. These include severance payments of up to 250 percent of the base monthly salary, and a further six months salary as an "adjustment" payment.

Congolese miners return to work

Workers at the state-run Generale des Carrieres et des Mines (Gecamines) in the Democratic Republic of Congo returned to work April 26 on the basis of a promise that President Laurent Kabila will attend a meeting with them. The copper and cobalt miners went out on strike last Thursday over unpaid wages and a plan to restructure the company, revealed by company chairman Billy Rautenbach earlier this month.

The workers in Kinshasa, part of a 26,000 strong work force

employed by Gecamines, said on Friday that they had not been paid for eight months. They also denounced the mass layoffs which are planned as part of the restructuring program. Most of the workers are concentrated in the mineral-rich area of Katanga province. Once a major producer of copper and cobalt in the 1980s, this region now only produces a small proportion of what it used to.

Mouthpeace Union strikers forced back to work in South Africa

Eighteen thousand members of the Mouthpeace Workers Union were forced back to work through an interdict by the high court. Urgently granted to Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) on April 21, the court order effectively brings the strike to an end. The company told the court that the reason for the strike was unclear and the union had not submitted any demands.

The strike was against management insistence that the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) be included in an investigation of the Mouthpeace demand that the Amplats provident fund be paid out to the workers, and a new fund set up. The NUM has always opposed paying out the fund and has distanced itself from the strike.

Mouthpeace was formed in 1996 as a breakaway from the NUM, after Amplats sacked the whole work force and then forced workers to reapply for their jobs. Mouthpeace is also complaining of delays in implementing wage agreements.

Nigerian teachers on strike

The failure of the Nigerian government to meet its commitment to pay the 3,000 niara a month minimum wage (around \$35) is escalating the number of strike actions throughout the country. Many primary teachers earn just 2,000 niara (\$22) a month. Teachers in Lagos joined a national teachers strike when they failed to return to work after the Easter holidays. The teachers have sided with civil servants who have brought approximately half of Nigeria's state administration to a standstill in a strike over the same issue.

"All workers in the public service are supposed to get the minimum wage but government is not paying teachers, so the strike continues," the general-secretary of the Nigerian Teachers Union, Gabriel Falade, said. "Until teachers are paid a new wage, they will stay at home."

The leader of the military regime, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, set to hand power over to General Abacha on May 29, is considering reducing the size of the civil service by at least 15 percent to pay for the minimum wage.



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