

# Workers Struggles: Europe and the Middle East

6 May 1999

## French railway workers continue strike action

French train drivers and engineers began strike action on April 28 to protest provisions attached to a cut in the working week from 39 to 35 hours.

The strike was called by the FGAAC union that represents about one-third of drivers. The union said that the accord on the working week would result in a freeze on wages, an increase of part-time work and changed working and pension conditions.

The strike hit Paris commuter services and disrupted train schedules and regional rail traffic in northern and eastern France. Commuter trains serving the Paris region were cut by more than a half. One high-speed train to Brussels and three high-speed trains to northern France were cancelled.

Management from the SNCF state railway said that the strike had the biggest impact on the Paris area where only a few suburban trains were running. On the same day, the FO trade union issued a statement which "calls on all rail workers in all France to join our action and widen the movement."

The leader of the French Communist Party, Robert Hue, has called on workers to end the strike. "If I were a rail worker, I wouldn't go on strike," he said last weekend.

## French baggage handlers return to work

On May 4, Air France ground staff at the Riviera airport of Nice ended their 19-day strike over baggage handling. The strike was called over plans by Air France to contract out some baggage handling work to private firms. The company has refused to retreat from these plans. Following the vote to return to work by the baggage handlers, they said they would continue their protest by other means.

## UK health workers vote for strike over Millennium dispute

On April 29, health workers voted to take strike

action to protest the government's refusal to pay any overtime to staff who will be working over the Millennium. Delegates at the Unison public service union's conference agreed to ballot its health service membership on a two-day strike.

Unison represents 460,000 workers in healthcare. Health Secretary Frank Dobson spoke at the conference. When he confirmed that there would be no nationally agreed bonus payments for working during the Millennium, he was loudly booed.

The union had called for a flat rate bonus of £500 for overnight shifts on December 31, 1999 and £250 for the first morning shift of the year 2000. The union pointed out that there would be a large rise in emergency admissions due to the New Year celebrations and increased alcohol consumption. A report in the *Nursing Standard* said that some nursing staff have threatened to resign before the end of December to avoid having to work over the New Year. The Unison conference also agreed to ballot its members over strike action to oppose the government's pay offer of 2.8 percent to ancillary staff.

## German rail workers strike over pay proposal

German railway workers took strike action on May 3, disrupting train services in both the eastern and western part of the country. The walkout was organised by the rail workers union GdED, which is calling for an increase in wages.

The strike hit long-distance and local services as staff in Frankfurt, Stuttgart and Munich, Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, Halle, Erfurt and Magdeburg stopped work. They returned to work later in the day. As the strike ended, a third round of negotiations began between the GdED and rail management.

The management has proposed a 1.5 percent wage increase from September, plus three monthly one-off payments of 300 marks (\$162). The GdED is calling

for an increase of between 5.5 and 6 percent. It rejected management's proposals, but said that it felt that there was now more agreement than previously following the negotiations. Both parties have agreed to continue talks on the pay agreement.

### **Water authority workers take strike action in Lebanon**

Water authorities in Lebanon struck on May 4 to protest the government's delay in paying overdue wages and delaying the introduction of better working conditions. The Union of Workers at Water Authorities in the North called the strike.

On May 3 the union issued a statement that demanded the "sorting out of the financial affairs of casual labourers at the Batroun Water Authority". The statement called for the "paying of overdue payments to workers at the Qobeiyat Water Authority in Akkar, who have been without pay for more than eight months, in addition to paying them transport compensation and financial aid for their children's education." The union has welcomed a government decision to reduce the country's 22 water authorities to five.



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