Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

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UK fire fighters to vote in ballot for national strike action

On May 11 the annual conference of the Fire Brigades Union in Bridlington, England voted to ballot its membership for national strike action in protest over proposals by employers to carry out changes in the structure of the national agreement regulating fire fighters' pay and working practices.

The vote to call a strike ballot was supported by local branches representing 50,514 members of the union, with just 1,547 opposed. Delegates at the conference said that the proposals could lead to job losses, worsening employment, and cuts in pay.

The General Secretary of the FBU, Ken Cameron, said of the decision to call a strike ballot, "We do not seek a strike but if that is what it takes to protect my members and to safeguard standards in the fire service, then that is what we will, albeit reluctantly, do. I sincerely wish that we were not having to ask our members to make the traumatic decision of whether to allow the employers to devastate the fire service or take industrial action to defend it."

Cameron called on the employers to reconsider their proposals and said that a form of local bargaining could be an alternative to a national fire agreement.

Fire authority employers have said that the changes are necessary because the Home Office has demanded efficiency savings.

The employers' chairman, Lawrence Conlon, said, "We are not in the business of destroying the national agreement, as the FBU has claimed. We will need to consider our position but it is not our intention to unilaterally impose anything. We believe in negotiation," he said.

The last national fire strike took place in 1977.

Russia miners strike in protest over unpaid wages

On May 6, 1,000 coal miners in Russia's Far East Sakhalin Island went on strike in protest at not being paid for 10 months. The miners on the island, based off Russia's Pacific coast, have said that the strike will last until May 16 and have also threatened to continue the strike until all the delayed wages are paid back in full.

The miners are from a strip mine that supplies most of the coal to a regional power station. The station was already experiencing a major fuel shortage before the dispute began.

Portuguese rail drivers strike to demand more pay

Rail drivers in Portugal took strike action May 11 to demand an increase in wages. The stoppages are to continue through May 25. The strike was called after negotiations between the union and CP failed without agreement last month.

The National Drivers Union said that the strike resulted in 40 percent of services being cancelled throughout the country. The state rail company, Caminhos de Ferro Portugueses, or CP, said it cancelled about 20 percent of scheduled services in some areas and reported delays of up to one hour.

The union said CP's 1,700 train drivers would work eight hours per day instead of the usual 10 hours through the duration of the strike. The CP is demanding that a pay award will only be implemented if it is tied to more flexible working hours. The union is not opposed to more flexible hours but wants pay and working hours to be discussed separately.

The government has broken up the railroad into two separate companies to prepare for privatisation. The privatisation is aimed at reducing its debts, estimated at more than 200 billion escudos ($1.1 billion).

Israeli workers strike over pay and working conditions

Workers in several sectors of the Israeli economy are involved in a number of protests and strikes. Workers in

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lower and higher education, art museums, health maintenance organisations (HMOs) and military research are involved in protests over wages and working conditions.

On May 11, teachers at all nurseries and elementary schools took strike action. The Teachers' Union called the strike. Teachers at junior high and high schools who are members of the Teachers' Union also struck in solidarity with their colleagues.

On the same day, doctors in the HMOs began strike action. The strike hit all general, psychiatric, geriatric and rehabilitation hospitals.

A strike of 2,000 administrative workers at Tel Aviv continued into its eleventh day on May 11. The staff have refused to unlock classrooms, so only a few lectures were being held. The dispute has closed university libraries and most laboratories, as well as hitting postal, telephone and registration services.

Negotiations held on May 10 between university management and workers' representatives failed to reach an agreement to end the dispute. Workers are demanding an updating of the car allowance agreement and a change in the status of some maintenance workers from part-time to full-time.

On May 10, 175 staff at the Tel Aviv Art Museum began a strike in protest at the late payment of wages to the institution's employees. Workers held two meetings of one hour each during working hours. About 30 museum workers, led by the head of the workers' committee, later entered the office of the museum's managing director, Moti Omar, to demand an explanation as to why their wages were already a week late in being paid.

Two thousand defence industry researchers began strike action on May 11. The strike is in protest over the break-up and threatened privatisation of Raphael and other research institutes. The researchers are also protesting the increasing tendency of defence institutes to employ short-term employees through manpower agencies.

Two hundred ten lifeguards on Israel's beaches are involved in a strike, which began at the beginning of the month, to protest delayed wage negotiations.

The Finance Minister Meir Sheetrit condemned the strikes, saying, "One week before the elections, any decision [on salary agreements] will be suspect, due to the influence of political interests." He called on the unions to call off strikes until the elections are over on May 17.

Students and pupils boycott lessons

All educational activity has come to a standstill throughout Cote d'Ivoire as pupils and students campaign to improve conditions in private and public schools and universities. The Ivory Coast government, in response to a further boycott by students on Thursday May 6, closed all schools indefinitely before the end of the academic year.

Students have been protesting for three weeks. The latest stay-away planned for Thursday and Friday was called in protest against the government of President Henri Konan Bedi's ban on student meetings and sit-ins.

Bla Gouede, general secretary of the Federation of Ivorian Students, said strike action would take place from May 11-15 nation-wide. Bedie warned that "parties" were behind the agitation and were "movements of destruction and insurrection in character.... We should not minimise the situation, we have to react now." The president's security minister, Dibonan Kone, assured him that his "boys" would be up to the task of protecting and defending the country, and "The police are ready to serve without hesitation, without complacency and with loyalty".

Workers threatened with wage reduction

Employees at Luanshya's Roan Antelope Mining Corporation of Zambia (RAMCOZ) are threatening to go on strike in response to a 5 percent wage reduction. The mining company's decision to reduce all unionised workers' salaries by five percent was taken on May 4, citing a drop in production as their reason.

Cameron Pwele, branch chairman of the Mineworkers Union of Zambia (MUZ), said, "It is true to say that what we make is not sufficient for us to be awarded a salary increment, but we can't allow them to reduce the salaries because what we are getting is nothing compared to the bosses."

When RAMCOZ was privatised the new owners signed a clause that wages would be increased every April. The mineworkers have still not received this year's increase.

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