Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

12 August 1999

University lecturers in Scotland strike for more pay

Members of the Association of University Teachers (AUT) walked out in Scotland August 9 to demand a 10 percent pay hike. University employers have rejected this demand, stating that they will pay no more than 3.5 percent. The AUT has calculated that lecturers' pay has fallen by 27 percent over the past two decades as compared to other professions.

The strike affected Scotland's eight "old" universities and will be repeated throughout the rest of the UK. The dispute was timed to coincide with the publication of student A Level results and caused the maximum disruption. August 9 was the first full working day when prospective students—with lower than expected examination results—could contact universities to see if they could get a place. Admissions tutors supported the dispute and refused to answer calls from students seeking spare places.

An AUT spokesman said, "We hoped we wouldn't have to take this action but we had no choice. We now want an independent pay review body set up to look at the issue."

Spanish baggage handlers strike for 72 hours over weekend

A series of strikes by baggage handlers at four Spanish airports took place between August 5 and 8. The workers are in dispute with Eurohandling at the Barcelona and Canary Island airports of Lanzarote, Gran Canaria and Fuerteventura. Talks were held on August 10 between the Commissiones Obreros (CC.OO) union that organised the action and airport management. The union is calling for a collective agreement for its members.

The CC.OO is the largest of five unions involved and represents 2,200 workers at the company. Eurohandling operates 11 percent of handling at Barcelona, 27 percent at Gran Canaria, 33 percent at Fuerteventura and 37 percent at Lanzarote.

Thousands of British holidaymakers were affected by the dispute at Lanzarote. An airport authority spokeswoman at the airport said that three cargo flights were called in at the weekend to transport around 6,000 bags and cases to Britain.

Polish coal miners end underground occupation

An underground occupation by striking coal miners at the Siersza mine ended earlier this week after the miners agreed to accept the closure of the pit. The Vistula Coal Company (Nadwislanska Spolka Weglowa) employs the 1,600 miners.

The agreement specifies the creation of a new company encompassing the mine, the Siersza energy plant and the city of Trzebinia. The deal reportedly means that 800 of the miners will be able to keep their jobs within the company, while the remainder will be employed at nearby energy plants. The new company will be established on September 1.

Israeli water workers continue industrial action

Water workers at the state-owned Mekorot water supply company in Israel continued their strike last week. They are opposed to the government's plan to privatise the national company and are demanding an increase in pay. The workers first took industrial action three weeks ago.

On August 4, the second day of the dispute, the water supply was cut off to thousands of residences in Tel Aviv and other major cities. The water disruption has affected a total of 16 cities. During the cut-off in Tel Aviv, authorities used emergency wells to supply hospitals, fire stations and other institutions. The strikers can disconnect the water supplies for four hours a day, a court has ruled.

Mekorot has lodged a judicial appeal to demand an end to the action and to force the staff back to work.

South African strike wave continues

South Africa's strike wave is set to continue with Telkom unions considering action in support of their wage claim, miners at some of the gold and coal mines balloting for industrial action and public service unions considering further protests.

The public service unions, with close to a million members, meet on August 11 to decide whether to embark on further mass actions to pressure the government into reviewing its final wage offer of R3.28 billion. This follows Friday's meeting where the unions lowered their wage demand from 10 to 7.3 percent for most members and 8 percent for teachers.

The government committee met yesterday to consider their options, and decide whether to bring in their latest offer without an agreement. The government needs an agreement with the unions to continue with its plans for a new wages policy, including changes to current employment contracts and the pay progression system. The unions say they might be “less than co-operative” in implementing these plans if there is no agreement on wages. They have also said that they will be less willing to make further rationalisations in public services.

A strike is also likely by the Communication Workers Union which has notified telecommunications company Telkom and the SA Post Office of their intention to begin a programme of action from August 16 after failing to resolve a wages dispute. The action comes after Telkom's announcement last month that as many as 11,000 jobs could be axed in a “streamlining” operation. The union is asking for an increase of between 11 and 13 percent, whereas Telkom has offered between 2 and 5 percent, tied to

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profitability.

The National Union of Mineworkers said that members in collieries and gold mines, other than those on Anglogold mines, would begin balloting for strike action on August 10. Although the union signed a wage deal with Anglogold on Friday, the dispute is continuing with other mining firms where increases offered range between 8 and 9 percent and with marginal mines where increases range between 0 and 7 percent. The unions will meet management again on Thursday. The Anglogold deal involved an increase of 9 to 10 percent.

Western Areas mine, a joint venture with Canada's Placer Dome, plans to retrench up to 2,900 miners. The union said it would challenge these plans, blaming the link with Canada for the fact that “they do not care for the biggest crisis facing this country, which is joblessness and unemployment."

Production at DaimlerChrysler in East London was suspended this week, as a four-day-old strike by 2,500 members of the National Union of Metalworkers of SA continued.

Operations at East Rand Proprietary Mines will go on another week after a decision by liquidators to extend the mine workers' temporary employment contract.

Botswana elections may be delayed by strike

If the government fails to meet demands by government-employed manual workers for a minimum wage of P600, their union is expected to call an emergency meeting to plan a general strike to take place by the second week of October. The administrative officer of the government manual workers union, Samuel Molaodi, said that a mandate has already been secured for the strike to be launched if the government failed to meet the workers' demands. The union aims to launch the strike at election time, when it will paralyse the proceedings. Members of the union will be needed as drivers a few days before the elections and on polling day to deliver and collect the ballot papers. "If this is what they have in mind, government should brace itself for a tough time," said an independent observer.

The government-dominated National Joint Industrial Co-ordinating Council (NJICC) recently recommended P600 as a minimum wage, but the government has not yet accepted this figure. The union is effectively demanding a P63 or 12 percent increase for public servants earning less than P600 per month. Of the 30,000 public servants that are members of the union, only 6,000 are affected by this demand.

Strikers harden resolve in Congo

Civil servants on strike in the Democratic Republic of Congo decided Thursday to toughen their stance, despite President Laurent Kabila's claim that he will meet their pay demand.

The workers have been demanding payment of arrears for the months of June and July, as well as the balance for May. They are also demanding a new wage scale and the sacking of the finance and budget minister, Mawampanga Nanga, due to his role in blocking any improvements. The strikers insist that salaries be denominated in foreign currency but paid in the Congolese franc to improve their purchasing power. They have rejected a proposal by government for different salaries for the different sections of the public administration.

The strikers increased the number of pickets mounted last week, blocking access to administrative buildings. The union's chairman, Emery Thsipamba, said the strike would only end when nine union leaders, in jail since the start of the action, are released. The union has refused to hold talks with the government as long as these nine members remain in custody.

At an extraordinary cabinet meeting held last Tuesday in Kinshasa, Kabila decided to meet the wage demands of the civil servants in order to end the strike, while warning against any attempt to use the strike for “political ends”.

Nigeria: Tensions rising in Ahmadu Bello University

A confrontation is taking place at the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, where Vice-Chancellor Professor Abdullahi Mahdi is clamping down on the students' union. On July 20 students from the "Students Consultative Forum" (SCF) wrote a public letter alleging that the institution's vice-chancellor ordered the arrest and torture of members of the National Executive of National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) when they visited the institution on July 15.

NANS representatives had visited ABU to hold meetings with students on the institution's two campuses when they were abducted by security personnel and detained for several hours. SCF Chairman Nwachukwu Chris said that "the NANS leaders, seven in number, were arrested on the orders of the VC, whipped and detained for four hours and then released.” The vice-chancellor responded by saying that the NANS leaders were in ABU to cause students' unrest.

Nwachukwu also alleged that the vice-chancellor mobilised 10 armed policemen on Wednesday July 14, and invaded the Kongo Campus of ABU with the intention of stopping a rally to mourn the killing of five students of the Obafemi Awolowo University three weeks before. "The VC's intention was to order the policemen to shoot the students if they had gone ahead with the proposed rally," Nwachukwu said.

Students claim that Prof. Mahdi is bent on preventing the revival of student unionism for several reasons, such as his intention to increase tuition fees to N8,000 per student.

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