Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

19 August 1999

Maltese fire fighters strike in dispute over union recognition

On August 17, fire fighters at Malta's International Airport struck for seven hours. The action led to the closure of the airport and the cancellation of 40 flights. The strike began at 08.30 (GMT) and was called by the General Workers' Union (GWU).

This action is the culmination of a dispute between two unions and airport management over union recognition. Earlier this week, the GWU had called on its members not to handle luggage.

The GWU is in dispute with the Union Haddiema Maghqudin over which union represents workers at the airport, both claiming that they represent a majority of staff.

The Union Haddiema Maghqudin will participate with the General Workers' Union at an industrial tribunal later this week to examine the issue of union recognition at the airport.

Polish coal miners threaten strike action

Coal miners in Poland threatened to hold a two-hour strike on August 30 to protest government plans to shed thousands of jobs in the industry. The strike was announced this week and is being organised by 12 mining unions. It is expected that that 70 percent of the country's 190,000 miners will participate in the action.

The Solidarity union will not be involved in the dispute as it is supporting the job losses and is a member of the coalition government of Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek.

The other unions are not against reforms in the mining industry and are not opposed to the job losses in principle, but are campaigning for the government to finance the massive redundancy programme that will be necessary, given the scale of the proposed job losses.

The leader of the Kontra miners union, Jerzy Kulisz, said this week, “The mining reform carried out by Buzek's government has collapsed. The proposed changes only aggravate the situation.” He said the strike could be called off if the government entered into "serious negotiations". The government is to meet this week to discuss the issue of the coal-mining dispute.

Some 50 state-owned coal mines have been in debt since the early 1990s when their state subsidies were cut. By June 30 this year the mines were 18.2 billion zlotys ($4.7 billion) in debt.

A government programme to close 25 of the pits was approved last year. This will result in the loss of around 115,000 jobs and will slash coal output. The government forecast that the measures would lead to the industry returning to profitability in 2002. However, this forecast is already outdated as falling coal prices have pushed losses to 3.3 billion zlotys from the forecast 1.3 billion zlotys this year.

UK junior doctors set to strike over pay and working conditions

Junior doctors in the UK have again threatened to take strike action this week.

On August 17, the British Medical Association (BMA) committee representing the doctors said that the government had to address the issue of doctors' pay, long hours and poor working conditions that junior doctors faced, or there would be strike action.

The BMA is presently in negotiations with the Health Ministry and said it would call strike action if no solution could be found. The junior doctors' committee said that it plans to hold 200 meetings in hospitals throughout the UK to discuss the campaign.

Andrew Hobart, the chairman of the junior doctors committee, said, “The threat of industrial action is now closer than ever. The government must wake up and listen to the UK's 35,000 junior doctors. This is a critical situation and junior doctors will take action if they have to. We must no longer tolerate these archaic conditions. We can not expect patients to be cared for by exhausted doctors who have had no sleep in the past 24 hours.”

Health Secretary Frank Dobson said that the government was going to propose a new contract to the doctors. The minister claimed that the contract would improve their working conditions and reduce working hours without a cut in pay.

Junior doctors are paid according to the numbers of hours they work and can work up to 100 hours a week. They have to work compulsory overtime on nights, weekends and holidays but receive hardly any extra payment for this.

Irish bus drivers demand 20 percent pay increase

On August 12, the National Bus & Rail Union (NBRU) said that it would call strike action in October if the Dublin Bus company did not increase workers' pay by 20 percent. Dublin Bus has agreed to meet the union over the pay claim but did not

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comment on whether it would agree to it.

NBRU General Secretary Peter Bunting addressed a letter to the firm outlining the demands of the union. He said that the bus workers had voted on and agreed to campaign for the pay rise.

The letter read, "This decision has been taken on the basis of the current high wage economy so prevalent in the country at the moment. An increase in wages is essential to halt the deterioration in our members' living standards and to reflect their commitment to what is the most stressful professional occupation any individual may undertake."

Dublin Bus recently reported a decrease in profits, down from £1.5 million to £1.3 million.

Undergound staff to take strike action in Glasgow

Staff on the Glasgow Underground system are to take industrial action in the next few weeks to oppose the introduction of increased working hours. Strathclyde Passenger Transport recently increased opening hours, and the underground now operates until 11.30pm, Monday through Saturday. The 200 workers employed on the underground recently rejected a new contract that included an £8-a-week pay increase on top of a 3 percent pay deal.

Turkish general opposes changes in social security system

Turkish trade unions held a general strike on August 13 to oppose government plans to reform the social security system. The main cities affected by the strike included Istanbul and the capital, Ankara, as well as other major urban centres across Anatolia. Workers in the public sector held protest marches in various cities.

In the western port of Izmir 90 percent of workers went on strike. The strike was called by the Turk-Is union confederation.

Police sprayed tear gas at workers in central Ankara as 3,000 public sector employees tried to occupy a crossroads. The strikers chanted slogans denouncing the International Monetary Fund. The social security changes are being carried out under the auspices of the IMF, which has made the reforms a pre-condition of any further loans.

The leader of Turk-Is, Bayram Meral, said, "The protest is continuing. Our aim is a political warning to the government". The government has already passed some legislation and began debating the social security changes on August 12. The debate resumed on the day of the general strike. The government has stated that the social security system will collapse if the changes are not implemented. Turkey's social security deficit is due to reach $5.87 billion in 1999.

Wage settlement imposed on South African civil servants

On August 12 the South African government imposed a 6.3 percent wage settlement on 1.1 million civil servants organised in 12 unions. The unions' original claim was for an increase of 10 percent.

The unions intend to go ahead with a protest demonstration on August 24 but are not planning to continue the strike action that they took in July. Around 300,000 civil servants went on strike two weeks ago in the largest stoppage to take place since the end of apartheid.

Public Service Administrator Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi told a news conference in Parliament, "There is no possibility of concluding an agreement in the bargaining council and hence we've decided to implement our final offer."

Anton Louwrens, chief negotiator for the Public Servants Association, said that his union supported the government's decision to implement its final offer and backdate it to July 1 because workers needed the wage increase. He also said, "Once civil servants had pocketed a salary rise they might be less inclined to back the strike."

Teachers, members of the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union, rejected the government's enforced settlement of its final offer, saying the move threatened future negotiations in the public services. A statement released by the union said, "This unilateralism is the worst type of labour relations practice reminiscent of the apartheid style of governance." If this is allowed, it went on to say, the government will no longer enter into any serious negotiations with unions on any issue in the future, as they will constantly wield the axe of unilateral action.

South African Telecom workers strike

Seventeen thousand South African telecoms workers went on strike Monday, August 16, with more expected to follow on Tuesday and Wednesday. The Communications Workers Union (CWU) represents nearly 59,000 workers. The CWU is demanding an increase in pay of 14 percent for auxiliary workers and 11 percent for supervisors, as well as changes to housing subsidies, allowances and leave. The state-controlled telecoms company is claiming the unions demand represents an increase of 24 percent and cannot be afforded under the present economic climate. They are offering a 5 percent across-the-board rise instead.

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