

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

26 August 1999

British fire fighters and ambulance workers to ballot for strike action

This week, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) said it would ballot its members for possible strike action, following rejection of a contract in May. The FBU said that the new contract could lead to a reduction in standards and job losses.

Ambulance workers are also to be balloted. The public sector workers union UNISON has asked its industrial action committee to ballot ambulance workers and paramedics following their rejection of a 3 percent pay deal in April. UNISON represents 200,000 National Health Service (NHS) staff.

Speaking about the ballots, UNISON's London convenor Geoff Martin said: "This is the first time since the winter of discontent in 1978 that we have both the emergency services contemplating strike action. It is a reflection of how angry key parts of the public sector are and all the signs are that anger is set to boil over into a major confrontation this winter. People have reached the end of their tether and are sick to death of being expected to provide emergency services on cheapskate wages—particularly when the average increase in the private sector is 4.5 percent per year and they are asked to take 3 percent."

Members of the GMB, another union representing 30,000 NHS workers including ambulance workers, also rejected the 3 percent pay offer. Members of the GMB rejected the pay deal by a margin of 10-1 and will now ballot for strike action.

The union's national officer Brian Strutton said, "Our members rejected this offer reluctantly but overwhelmingly. The offer of a pay increase of less than 1 percent after inflation is simply too little for workers who are already paid some of the lowest wages in the NHS. As it stands it just does not represent a living wage for dedicated staff whose job is saving lives."

Maltese fire fighters strike attacked by police

On August 20, riot police attacked striking fireman at Malta International Airport and arrested 49 workers. The police tried to disperse the strikers following a successful injunction by airport management, temporarily banning strike action. Following the arrests, some of the strikers set up a blockade and temporarily stopped a police bus leaving the scene with eight strikers on board.

The General Workers Union called the strike last week as the result of a dispute between itself and another union over which of them represents workers at the airport.

The leader of the GWU, Tony Zarb, said that the police had beaten and arrested striking workers at the airport "in a barbaric manner" and that some of the strikers had been hospitalised. Pilots and dockworkers at Valletta harbour joined the strike following the police attack.

The strike on August 20 closed the airport for a number of hours for the second time in four days. Twenty flights were delayed by the firemen's action before the airport opened later in the day.

The Maltese government has condemned the strikers and said that the police were defending the rights of those who wanted to work. In its statement following the police action last week the government also said that fireman were not legally allowed to go on strike.

Pilots at British Airways French affiliate demand better pay and conditions

Airline pilots at Air Liberté, the French subsidiary of British Airways, took strike action for three hours between 03.00 and 05.00 GMT on August 20. The pilots were striking to demand an increase in pay, an extra day's leave for pilots working short- and medium-haul routes, and a general improvement in conditions.

Algerian state steel company to destroy more jobs

The Algerian state-owned steel company Sider is to begin a plan for "restructuring," resulting in 3,400 workers losing their jobs. A conflict has begun between

the company and Sider's trade union. The union say that they “entirely reject the company reorganisation plan”. This comes after the union helped to carry through the first round of layoffs in 1997. At that time, Sider agreed to dismiss only 6,150 workers, but later laid off 10,000.



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