

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

7 October 1999

Lorry drivers across Europe protest dangerous working hours

Lorry drivers protesting against dangerously long working hours took action across Europe on Tuesday. The protest, organised by the London-based International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), affected 30 countries and even extended to Africa and Latin America. Drivers were involved in a series of protests including blockades, demonstrations and lobbies. In France drivers blocked the country's borders with Belgium, Germany and Spain and obstructed the Channel Tunnel, by organising a "go slow" on approach roads, causing widespread traffic jams.

The ITF says that long hours and fatigue are causing deaths and accidents on the roads. The day of action was co-ordinated with a meeting of European Union (EU) transport ministers the following day. The ITF are calling for the implementation of an EU Working Time Directive, limiting weekly hours to 48. At present it is not unusual for lorry drivers to work a 70- to 80-hour week because of pressure from employers.

Irish doctors in dispute

Last week 170 non-consultant doctors at the Mater Hospital in Dublin voted unanimously to take strike action in dispute over unpaid overtime payments. The unpaid overtime is for Sunday work, some of which dates back to January 1997. The strike is due to begin in two weeks.

Czech air controllers strike

Czech air traffic controllers took strike action September 28 to protest against long working hours, with 13 of 65 controllers striking. The action led to a number of disruptions and delays to scheduled flights, with passenger and cargo transit over Czech territory having to be diverted.

The staff returned to work the next day following discussions between the Transport Ministry and controllers union leaders. But the deal drawn up by the two bodies only agrees that the Transport Ministry will

not compel controllers to work overtime and that it will train more staff.

Zimbabwe doctors strike continues

The strike by Zimbabwe's junior doctors for better pay and working conditions has entered its third week. Despite government pressure, the doctors rejected a government pay offer last Thursday and vowed to continue with industrial action. Lincoln Shenje, secretary-general of the Hospital Doctors' Association, said that the government had "re-offered an old package" when it announced on Wednesday night a doubling of the on-call allowance to doctors in state hospitals, but said there was no money to meet the pay demands. "We have been negotiating for eight months for a total revamping of the health system," Shenje said. "In the central hospitals medical equipment needs to be refurbished—patients are dying because they can't afford medication. We want the working conditions of doctors improved, and will strike until these basic grievances are addressed." The strike has paralysed Zimbabwe's healthcare system, forcing health authorities to discharge all non-emergency patients, and senior doctors and consultants to cope with all emergencies.

Mali health service hit by two-day strike

The Malian health sector was paralysed last Thursday, after the country's two health unions called a two-day strike demanding improved working conditions. The strike was widely observed in all the hospitals of Bamako, where only minimal services were being provided. Workers in the public sector, including doctors and other health workers, have the lowest wages in francophone West Africa. The action follows a similar strike by the National Union of Malian Workers three months ago for higher pay. In early September the government said it would raise civil servants' salaries by 7 percent and agreed a series of other measures, including a revision of water and electricity tariffs. Ghana has also been hit by strikes in response to cuts in healthcare.

Modern-day slave trade in South Africa

Modern-day slavery is on the increase in the Western Cape, according to police and welfare workers. There is a growing trade in rural workers, who are lured to the city under false pretences by employment agencies. "It's a slave market," said Athlone police inspector Deon Jaftha.

More than 20 agencies provide "domestics" in Cape Town, recruiting workers from the country. Widespread poverty and lack of jobs makes these young people ideal targets for agents looking for easy profits. Jessica Fortuin of the Cape Flats Development Association said many rural people had been duped into expecting decent jobs. "Often when they arrive in Cape Town they are bundled into a room on the agent's premises and paraded like cattle in front of employers for them to pick and choose." Employers pay agents up to R300 (US\$52) for the worker of their choice and return them if dissatisfied.

The jobs are all poorly paid, if at all, and usually involve long hours. Men are used as hawkers or on construction sites; women are used as domestic workers. Often they land up on the street or in shelters if they can't raise enough money to get home. Workers as young as 14 are brought from afar. Fares are deducted from their first month's salaries, leaving them with nothing.



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