

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

21 October 1999

French medical workers protest attacks on health care

On October 17, thousands of doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and pharmacists demonstrated in Paris to protest a government plan limiting spending by private health care practitioners. The organisers of the protest said that up to 50,000 people attended the demonstration. Some protesters carried placards reading "Stop treating doctors as guilty" and "I care about my health".

Under current legislation, doctors in the private sector are reimbursed from social security funds. This is set to change as the National Assembly (parliament) debates a new bill that penalises doctors if they overspend a set budget. The proposed cut in doctors' budgets is part of a general debate on social security legislation in the Assembly.

Claude Maffioli, the leader of the main medical union in France, told the demonstration, "If health isn't a priority, then we're just looking for policies that cost the least. The government today uses a stopgap social security policy. Soon we'll have long lines outside the hospitals."

According to the OECD, France spent 9.6 percent of its gross domestic product on health care in 1997. The European Union average was 8 percent.

Armed secret service squads attack Russian mill workers' occupation

Last week, armed Russian secret service squads stormed a paper and pulp mill in Sovietskyin in an attempt to end an 18-month occupation by workers opposed to the privatisation of the plant. Sovietskyin is a small town 140 kilometres north of St. Petersburg. The attack took place on October 14 and at least two workers were shot and six others injured.

The armed police squad arrived at the factory at 02.00 local time wearing masks and camouflage, and broke into the mill. After the squad entered the factory, other factory workers came to the building and surrounded it.

The deputy governor of the region, Grigory Dvas, said the squad was ordered "to free the territory of the factory from people who didn't have the right to be there under a court order".

The mill is in the Vyborg district of the city and was

bought in 1997 by the British-owned firm Nimonor. Shortly thereafter the company announced a restructuring plan that was opposed by the workers at the mill who proceeded to strike. The factory has been occupied and operated by its workers since February this year. The Leningrad region administration said that in August the mill worked at 64 percent capacity, producing cellulose, wallpaper and paper.

This year, Nimonor sold its shares in the factory to another British firm, Alcem UK, whose representatives have not been able to enter the plant since acquiring it. It is understood that 2,000 workers could lose their jobs as a result of a restructuring plan by Alcem.

Workers have said that Alcem plans to close the mill and sell its assets. A worker at the factory, Vera Gaidaman, said, "We were told that Alcem is planning to turn the mill into a plywood factory, and if they do, a majority of the workers will be fired. If the workers lose the mill, they will have nowhere to go, nothing to eat."

British train guards to take strike vote over safety

Train guards in Britain are to take strike action on October 22 for 24 hours in a dispute over safety procedures. The strike comes two weeks after the Paddington train crash in London, which killed 30 people.

The guards are striking to protest against plans by Britain's rail companies to transfer responsibility for safety to drivers. Under the new proposals, if a breakdown of a train occurs or if an accident takes place, the responsibility for safety is transferred from the guard to the driver. At present the guard is responsible for safety on the train.

The rail operators want to introduce these changes under the guise of simplifying procedures, but the guards fear their jobs will be downgraded as a result and this will in turn jeopardise safety. In a Rail Maritime and Transport union ballot announced on October 15, 85 percent of guards voted to take industrial action. The strike is set to affect 23 of the 25 private rail companies operating across Britain.

Three of the rail firms, Virgin, South West Trains and Connex South Central, have begun legal action against the RMT, questioning the legality of the planned strike. The Health and Safety Executive has come out in favour of the

changes being proposed by the rail companies.

Israeli Labour Court orders health workers to end strike

On October 13, the Tel Aviv Labour Court ordered striking Clalit HMO nursing, administrative and support staff to end their strike and return to work by 7 p.m. the following day. The workers had begun the strike to protest against the health authority decision to close the 39-bed Talbieh mental health facility in Jerusalem.

Lebanese teachers vote to strike for two days

Teachers in Lebanon have voted to strike on October 20 and 21. The teachers are demanding a 35 percent increase in pay, better working conditions and an end to cuts in the education budget. The teachers are members of the Private School Teachers' Union and are demanding that public, private, primary and intermediate grade teachers receive a pay rise. Last week secondary school teachers received a pay increase of a similar amount. The teachers are also opposed to a proposal that they increase the hours they work without additional pay. Education Minister Mohammed Youssef Beydoun said that "I'll send the Cabinet a draft bill regarding this issue. We therefore will not ask private school teachers to increase their working hours, so they need not strike."

Zimbabwe doctors strike set to grow

A stoppage by Zimbabwe's doctors in opposition to cuts in the health service is now in its fourth week, with no end in sight. Pleas from members of parliament to return to work were rejected by the strikers. Doctors were prevented from attending a meeting organised by parliament, which was to seek a settlement to the strike. The meeting had been planned to bring together doctors, cabinet ministers and deputies, but the leader of the parliament, Emmerson Mnangagwa, objected to the doctors themselves being present, and ordered them out of the room. A meeting was organised for the doctors to attend, from which members of the cabinet were absent, but doctors refused to attend saying they did not see the point when their demands had not been met. The doctors are demanding a complete overhaul of their salaries, as well as a bigger proportion of the budget to be spent on health.

Other health workers are set to join the strike next week. Stella Zengwa, president of the Zimbabwe Nurses Association (Zina), refused to be drawn on whether nurses would do so, but radiographers and laboratory scientists have already given written commitments to doctors promising support unless their demands were met.

Junior doctors started the strike almost four weeks ago, and were then joined by senior doctors. Radiographers are already refusing to do on-call duties. In October 1996, nurses and doctors went on a record 49-day strike seeking the same demands as those of the current strike.

National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa begin rolling industrial action

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa has announced that it is to begin a programme of "rolling mass action" in protest at mounting job cuts in the industry. Another 6,000 workers are likely to lose their jobs this month. Since 1987, 300,000 workers have lost their jobs in the industry, 126,000 of them in the engineering sector. The president of NUMSA, Mthuthuzeli Tom, said the rolling action will include pickets, work stoppages and lunch-hour protests, but will stop short of full strike action. The previous union policy of relying on the courts foundered, when they ruled that the decision by Western Areas management to lay off 2,500 workers was legal.

Five thousand fishermen strike in South Africa

Five thousand fishermen have gone on strike in the Cape Province of South Africa to demand higher wages. The strike has closed down the processing factories and left exporters unable to meet orders. It has already brought the fish processing industry on the west coast to a near standstill. It has also shut down factories that process pilchards and anchovies in the towns of Elandsbaai, Lambert's Bay, Gansbaai, Hout Bay and St. Helena Bay, where workers are said to have set light to oil drums on Tuesday. The strike is the result of a wage dispute that has been raging since July. The fishermen are demanding a wage increase of 10.5 percent, while the industry is offering only 7.5 percent. A spokesman for the Food and Allied Workers' Union said it was calling on part-time workers not to stand in for the strikers.



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