

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

26 November 1999

Call centre staff strike in Britain

On November 22, British Telecommunications call centre workers took the first of a series of three 24-hour strikes. The action, in protest against unacceptable working conditions including intimidation and constant monitoring, was the first national strike against the telecommunications giant in 13 years.

The strike was organised by the Communication Workers Union (CWU), and involved some 4,000 workers in 37 calls centres. BT has agreed to meet with CWU representatives later this week. Two further one-day stoppages are planned on December 10 and on an unspecified day in January.

French transport workers and TV/radio technicians strike

Transport workers in the French cities of Marseilles and Lyon took strike action for six days last week to demand better working conditions and pay following the introduction of the government-legislated 35-hour week. Those on strike included bus, metro and tram staff. On November 18, just one of four underground train systems was running and only one bus line was operating in the city of Lyon. In Marseilles, the strike was organised by a combination of 10 local transport unions and disrupted all trains, buses and trams. The strike ended on November 22 following talks between unions and management, which were reported to have reached agreement on "key issues".

During the same period, staff at French state-run public radio and television stations were also on strike. Many programmes on the Radio France service were replaced by non-stop music after technicians walked out. A number of different technical unions are involved in the dispute, which also heavily disrupted news bulletins on state TV. Technicians at France 3 television returned to work on November 20 on their union's recommendation, but technicians at France 2

remained on strike.

Polish teachers strike for 24 hours to demand more pay and funding for education

More than 350,000 teachers in Poland took strike action on November 19 to demand a pay increase and more funding for the education system.

The strike is in response to the government restructuring of Polish education, which begins this term. The legislation increased the years of compulsory education from eight to nine and converted some 5,000 technical schools into general schools.

Teachers are angry that they have to perform extra duties for the same pay. Many teachers in Poland's 36,000 schools earn less than \$150 a month. Slawomir Broniarz, a spokesman for the ZNP teaching union, one of the main organisers of the strike said "Around 50 percent of schools took an active part but we had support for the strike from some 90 percent of the schools in one form or another. The main reason for this protest is to obtain an increase of funds in education so that schools can teach students under normal conditions". The government condemned the action and Education Minister Miroslaw Handke said those striking "have a poor level of education."

Italian petrol station assistants take industrial action

Petrol pump assistants in Italy began the first day of a planned four-day strike on November 16. The workers are striking to protest against the deregulation of the energy sector by the government. The assistants fear large-scale job losses and a degradation of customer service as a result of the proposed changes.

Government officials met with union leaders representing the assistants in the hours leading up to the strike in an attempt to avert it. The government proposes to close 5,400 petroleum outlets with the loss of thousands of jobs, leaving 20,000 outlets remaining.

Union leaders suspended the strike on November 17 after they claimed to have reached agreement with the government. The deal centres on changes to a recent decree for the closure of pumps distributing less than a certain amount of petrol by the year 2000.

Journalists on Jerusalem newspaper strike oppose ending of work contract

Last week, journalists at the Israeli English-language newspaper the *Jerusalem Post* threatened to take industrial action against plans by their employer, Hollinger International Inc, to end a work agreement. Hollinger intends to end the collective agreement—affecting 40 of the 60 staff—when it expires at the end of the year. A new agreement is said to contain a clause that would allow management to fire any worker at any time.

The Hollinger-group and its related companies publish 85 daily newspapers around the world, including the *Daily Telegraph* in London, the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Jerusalem Post*.

Zimbabwe teachers threaten strike

Teachers in Zimbabwe's state schools have threatened to strike unless their salaries are doubled in January. The threat comes after doctors and nurses won pay rises following strike action.

With 80,000 members, the Zimbabwe Teachers' Association (Zimta) is the largest union in the public service. It pulled out of salary negotiations with the government on Thursday, warning the government that by refusing to offer a significant increase “they might be forcing us onto the streets.”

Civil servants believe the government should review the salaries of all its employees equally, without giving preferential treatment to any sector. The government had promised a “generous” review of civil servants' salaries in January, but a prominent economist, John Robertson, is advising the government that it needs to cut the public sector so as to reduce expenditure.

Kenya: Student anger boils over again at Moi University

Students at Moi University rioted last Saturday, barely a week after the institution was re-opened following closure after a similar protest. The authorities claimed that a large amount of property was destroyed in the protest, including books, computers, television sets, photocopiers and a satellite dish.

Students said the latest protest was sparked by the

university administration's decision to ban their organisation and a move to prevent them from cooking in their rooms. They also said the issues raised during the earlier riot of October 19, including overcrowding in their hostels, had not been resolved. The earlier riot was sparked by the disappearance of one of the student leaders, Mr. George Matata, from his college room.



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