

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

20 January 2000

Railway drivers in south of England to strike in contract dispute

Railway drivers at one of Britain's largest rail franchises will strike on six separate days from the end of January through February. The industrial action was called by the drivers union ASLEF and was announced on January 15. The rail workers are employed by Connex, the French-owned company that runs services to London from southern England, transporting more than 200,000 commuters into the capital every day.

The day-long strikes will commence on January 25. They follow a dispute over working hours and conditions. The action stems from a failure by Connex and ASLEF to reach agreement over the implementation of a 35-hour week for drivers. As well as the one-day strikes ASLEF also announced that its members would not work any non-contractual overtime from January 25.

Drivers on Connex South Eastern voted by 388 to 154 in favour of the strike action—a majority of 71 percent—and South Central route drivers supported taking action by 378 to 81, an 82 percent majority.

In December, Connex took legal action against drivers' refusal to work rest days, which had led to the cancellation of trains.

ASLEF General Secretary Mick Rix said, "The massive vote for industrial action shows the frustrations of our members with the tactics of the Connex management—they are saying enough is enough. Connex has a very bad reputation internally and you can see that from the way they treat the passengers. They treat their staff in the same way."

Television news staff to strike over change in contract

Journalists and technicians at Independent Television News (ITN) are to strike for 24 hours on January 27 and for four hours on January 31. Talks between management and unions will be held with the conciliation service ACAS next week in a bid to prevent the strikes.

The strike vote was in opposition to a proposal by ITN management to introduce night working for all employees. This is part of plans to turn the station into a 24-hour news channel. Staff are also opposed to the proposal introducing a

five-day working week across the board for all employees.

Workers voted heavily in favour of action in the strike ballot. Members of the Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (Bectu) and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) voted by 80 percent majorities to back industrial action.

Hungarian airline workers strike in support of rail staff

On January 12, airport workers in Hungary held a two-hour strike in support of rail workers who are in dispute with the state rail company MAV. The airport staff struck at the country's main Ferihegy airport and the action delayed at least 16 flights. The long-running rail strike ended on the same day pending further negotiations between unions and management.

Polish bus drivers end 13-day sit-in

On January 16, 500 bus drivers in the town of Gorzow Wielkopolski ended a 13-day strike after agreeing with the local authorities that a new manager would be appointed at their bus company.

The drivers had launched a sit-in strike to demand the return of a former manager whom they viewed as being able to secure better pay and conditions. The local authority has agreed to replace the current manager with a new one, but not the one workers had asked be returned.

Teachers strike in Israel

One hundred thousand teachers throughout Israel began strike action on January 16. The teachers struck at kindergartens, elementary schools, some junior high and high schools. Teacher training schools and adult education classes were also hit by strike action. The Finance Ministry's director of salaries, Yuval Rachlevsky, said that the government might seek legal arbitration in an attempt to stop the strike.

The teachers are in dispute with the government over the non-payment of a supplement they are due because of the erosion of wages. Teachers are also demanding that their wages be linked to a number of economic indicators. The teachers federation is calling for a 15 percent increase in salary for elementary school teachers. The union says this is

the amount by which their pay has been reduced in the last five years.

Four months ago arbitrators in the dispute ruled that junior high and high school teachers receive a one-time compensation of 1.2 percent of their annual salaries (approximately NIS 1,000). They also called for a new system to be introduced for determining the pay of non-elementary schoolteachers and that they should not be linked to engineers' salaries. The teaching unions have rejected these decisions.

General strike hits Burundi

Burundian trade unions began a general strike on Monday, January 17 against new tax measures that increase the price of essential goods such as fuel, sugar, rice, beer and cement. The strike was observed by a majority of workers in the civil service and private companies. This was in spite of government broadcasts from the state-owned radio and television stations urging workers to go to work.

Schools remained closed in Bujumbura, hospitals were reduced to a minimum service, and many state industries were closed due to the strike. The government has accused labour unions of trying to destabilise the country, after they broke off negotiations on Friday. It also said that workers would not be paid wages for the duration of the strike. A government statement broadcast over the radio said anyone who did not show up for work would be fired, and called on union leaders to negotiate their demands. The unions have said that they could not negotiate with the government until the price hikes and new tax measures are suspended.

Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation workers strike for pay rise

Workers from both radio and television began a strike at the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) last week, demanding a salary increase to match that awarded to civil servants. The workers walked out after negotiations with management did not produce the 60 to 90 percent pay rise the workers were demanding.

"They want to give us a 40 percent increment, and we feel that it is too little, taking into account the present economic conditions, worse still that there are people who have been given higher percentages. We should fall in the same category," said one worker.

All grades of workers, including technicians, cameramen and news readers, gathered around the office of director-general Luke Munywarara's yesterday. They were demanding a meeting over the salary increases. He initially refused to address the workers, but then changed his mind when he was told they had vowed not to leave the premises until he had spoken to them. Management has now said they will organise a meeting with the workers' committee early next week, when the percentage increase will be determined.

Botswana marketing board workers call off strike

After 10 days of industrial action, workers employed by the Botswana Agricultural Marketing Board (BAMB) are calling off their strike after union leaders urged them to return to work, claiming their grievances can be resolved through the courts.

The strike began on Tuesday, January 11, paralysing the operations of BAMB. Its aim was to force payment of a backdated salary increase. While other government workers' salaries were raised from July 1998, BAMB employees were only given a pay rise from April 1999. Despite this, the government declared it owed the workers nothing. "The board is in the red and cannot pay up even if it owed them money," said Lucas Gakale, the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture. He added that the agricultural marketing body, which owed millions, was technically bankrupt, while denying that the board would be liquidated as was earlier reported.

Striking employees dismissed this, saying that BAMB's financial state had nothing to do with them or their pay rise. They added that BAMB should pay up because it had recently given a huge discount to one of its customers. Gakale has threatened to take the striking workers to court, a possibility opened up by the union calling off the action and presenting the courts as the friend of the workers.

Ghana university closed down over student boycott

The University of Cape Coast, about 160 kilometres west of Accra, has been closed down until further notice, following a decision by the General Assembly of the Students Representative Council to continue boycotting lectures. The students had boycotted lectures all week in protest against new grading systems that raised the pass mark from 40 to 50 percent and the points required for grade A from 75 to 80 percent. They contend that the facilities at the university do not support the higher standards being required.



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