

Workers Struggles: Europe, Africa and the Middle East

2 March 2000

Italian government and unions sign pact limiting the right to strike

On February 28, the government and union leaders in Italy signed a pact aimed at preventing strikes and other industrial action this year. The agreement was signed under the pretext of ensuring less disruption for the projected 30 million pilgrims and tourists who will visit the country during the Roman Catholic Church's Holy Year 2000.

The pact does not specify an outright ban on strikes, but severely reduces the right to take industrial action. Trade unions must give a “mediating committee” ample notice of disputes and conflicts that could lead to strikes. The role of the mediating committee is then to stop any such strike from developing.

Rome Mayor Francesco Rutelli said of the pact, “Naturally, it doesn't pretend to be a miracle formula for avoiding strikes and reducing conflicts. But it's a step in the right direction.” Rutelli said that he plans to emulate the national accord with a local one governing strikes and demonstrations.

The trade unions said that strikes already scheduled would not be affected by the agreement. On the same day that the pact was signed, air traffic controllers stopped work at all of Italy's major airports from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., resulting in a number of flight cancellations and delays.

On March 2, bus, tram and subway workers are to strike for 24 hours in a dispute over higher wages and shorter hours. Rail workers are also set to strike on March 8 for 24 hours.

Britain's train guards vote to strike

Train guards from most British rail companies have voted in favour of strike action in a dispute over job responsibility and safety issues. The result of a national ballot was announced on February 23, with guards from 16 out of 23 train companies voting for a series of five one-day national strikes. Guards at the four rail companies in Scotland—ScotRail, GNER, Virgin West Coast and Cross Country—were also amongst those voting to take action. There are 1,500 train guards in Scotland.

The only companies that will be unaffected by the dispute are Thameslink and West Anglia Great Northern, as their trains are one-person operated and do not carry guards.

The 5,500 guards are represented by the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT). The strike has been called in opposition to plans by the rail infrastructure operator Railtrack

to change staff responsibilities, putting drivers in charge of safety instead of guards. This could lead to redundancies for guards and will jeopardise safety for railway workers and passengers.

The RMT have not set any specific dates for the strike action and have agreed to further talks with Railtrack and the Association of Train Operating Companies. The RMT said that if no settlement to the dispute could be agreed within one week, then the union's executive would meet again and set strike dates.

Ford unions in Britain cancel strike

Unions representing 3,000 Ford engineers, designers and clerical staff have called off a series of strikes over pay and pensions after reaching a provisional agreement with the company. No specific details are yet available regarding the new arrangements. The first strike was due to take place on February 25. The industrial action was originally called for parity with the 15 percent pay increase granted to production workers and in opposition to Ford's offer of 11 percent. The white-collar workers are also opposed to the company's plans to merge the pension funds of both groups. Further strikes were planned on February 29 and a three-day stoppage from March 6-8.

Palestinian students demonstrate in support of striking teachers

On February 22, more than 1,000 Palestinian students demonstrated and marched to the Palestinian Education Ministry to show support for striking teachers. In Hebron the students demanded the resignation of Education Minister Yasser Amr. Baton-wielding Palestinian police injured three students, aged between 13 and 15. The police detained another three protesters.

Elementary and high school teachers began strike action on February 19 in the West Bank towns of Hebron and Bethlehem, in opposition to a proposed cut in their retirement package by 10 percent. The cut affects all 18,000 public school teachers on the West Bank. A Palestinian teacher earns an average salary of \$400 a month.

The Palestinian authorities responded to the demonstration with police raids on three Hebron TV stations. They confiscated video footage of Tuesday's clashes. The authorities also closed down a fourth Hebron station, Nawras TV, the

previous week after it had broadcast interviews with the teachers.

Zambian government backs down over doctors' strike

The day after it fired 200 junior doctors, the Zambian government backed off and reinstated them, thus averting their all-out strike planned for Wednesday. On Tuesday, the Zambian authorities fired all the junior doctors who had been striking for two weeks over pay and conditions. After meeting for four hours with senior doctors, the government conceded to demands for the unconditional reinstatement of the sacked junior medics. The doctors' demands also included an improvement in conditions of service for medical practitioners. No time-frame was given for meeting the doctors' demands.

Following the government decision to reinstate them, the doctors suspended their decision to strike until a general meeting on Thursday, March 3. The government was forced into emergency talks on Wednesday after senior doctors, who had been manning the hospitals during the past 14 days of the strike, issued an ultimatum that they would go on strike over the sacking of their junior counterparts.

Zambia's University Teaching Hospital (UTH), the country's main health institution is in crisis—essential drugs are not available, and all but emergency cases go elsewhere for treatment. The hospital's 143 junior doctors went on strike last month in protest over conditions and the lack of essential drugs. The government responded by sacking 81 of them. It called in some 30 doctors from provincial hospitals and recruited five foreign doctors to help out at UTH, in addition to Cuban and Russian medical personnel already assisting at the hospital. It has promised to open negotiations with the sacked doctors, but so far has set no date.

"We feel we are coping. You know why? Because most patients have stopped coming here and have gone to private clinics. Only the critically ill are coming," a hospital staff member explained.

Since January last year, UTH has operated on a monthly budget but allocations are only made when the government has the revenue to spend, resulting in serious shortfalls for the hospital. "It's just like the doctors said in their demands, we need medical equipment and drugs," a hospital official said. "If you want quality you need to have the money to buy it. With erratic funding most of the important drugs were not being bought."

The situation at UTH is symptomatic of a wider health crisis confronting Zambia. The government, saddled with repayment obligations on its US\$7 billion debt, has cut social spending to around 6 percent of its overall budget, UN sources said. Debt servicing absorbs more than health and education spending combined. The debt burden represents 185 percent of Zambia's GNP compared to an average for Africa of 69 percent of GNP.

According to UNICEF, 49 percent of Zambian rural children are stunted, while WHO estimates that per 1,000 pregnant women, 70 die before giving birth. A Zambian government and

UN Population Fund (UNFPA) study last year reported an overall maternal mortality rate of 800 per 100,000, but with significant regional variations. The devastating impact of HIV/AIDS is in part responsible for the sharp fall in life expectancy from 49 years in 1992 to an estimated 37 years at present.

Protests and strikes in Tunisia

Centring on the large cities and many small towns of Tunisia, demonstrations and strikes have caused turmoil in this small North African country. The demonstrations by high school students and the unemployed, with support from the rest of the population, have violently attacked all symbols of the government and erected checkpoints, burnt tyres, and vandalised cars.

The demonstrators have clashed with the police, resulting in many casualties, and sometimes forcing them to make a retreat. Their slogans have condemned the rise in the price of basic food products, the deterioration of purchasing power, and the rise of unemployment, but also expressed their resentment towards public authorities and the spread of corruption.

The demonstrations began soon after the announcement of the professional drivers' strike (taxi, long-distance cab and long-distance lorry drivers) on February 1. The strike was motivated by the implementation of a new driving code, which institutes an additional commercial vehicle driving licence. The drivers reacted against the increase of police intimidation this would unleash.

The protests themselves were halted only by severe police repression. Hundreds of arrests of young people took place. Arrests were made at night, and were sometimes accompanied by brutality. Some youths complained of maltreatment at police stations. At Gabes, Sfax and Mednine, around 40 youths, some of whom are still in detention, will be tried for damage to public property and causing disturbance to public order.

Such popular protests in Tunisia are the first since the "bread riots" of 1984. They reveal the true extent of poverty and unemployment there, normally hidden by internal and external media censorship.



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