

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

23 March 2000

French teachers and taxmen protest against government

On March 16, large demonstrations were held throughout France by striking teachers and taxmen. Three-quarters of France's teachers are in dispute. Their protest against government plans to reform the education system has the support of some 200,000 pupils and parents. It is estimated that more than 20,000 teachers, pupils and parents demonstrated in Paris. The teachers are demanding more state spending on education and the resignation of Education Minister Claude Allegre, who said recently that he would "slim down the mammoth" public education system, which would include a freeze on hiring new staff.

Several thousand finance ministry workers also demonstrated in Paris and marched to Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's offices to protest against planned job losses in their department. Half the country's tax inspectors struck and many occupied 25 of the finance ministry's 27 regional data centers. The occupation prevented tax returns from being completed. The tax officials are striking to oppose a government plan to restructure the service, which could lead to the loss of thousands of jobs, particularly in rural areas.

In the cities of Marseilles and Toulon teachers, pupils and tax inspectors demonstrated in a joint rally with 10,000 in Marseilles and 6,000 in Toulon.

Chemical workers strike in Finland

Five thousand chemical, oil, gas and petrochemical workers in Finland began national strike action on March 16 in a dispute over pay and working conditions. The workers are demanding a cut in hours, particularly for shift work, and are calling for a 33.6-hour week instead of the current 34.8. They are also calling for a pay increase comparable to that in other Finnish industries.

The strike was called by the Kemianliitto trade union.

Twenty-two companies were struck. The union has stated that if the strikers' demands are not met by March 23, it will ask a further 8,000 workers in the plastics and chemical industries to join the strike. Workers belonging to the sister organisation of the Finnish union in Sweden are also supporting the strike and have said that they will not handle any work transferred during the dispute. Other key industries affected by the dispute include the paper and steel industries.

Lebanese teachers continue strike action

Public primary and intermediate schoolteachers in Lebanon are to strike for one day on March 23. The teachers plan to hold a rally and march to Parliament. Teachers in the private sector are presently in negotiations with Members of Parliament in an attempt to pass legislation giving them a pay increase. The Education Minister, Mohammed Beydoun, has refused to meet any representatives of the teachers and the government cabinet has rejected the appeal for an increase in salary by both public and private sector teachers.

The teachers are demanding an increase of between 22 and 29 percent to match that given to secondary school colleagues last year. The government has attempted to divide teachers by awarding private primary and secondary school instructors rises of between 16 and 20 percent. Trade union representatives of the private school teachers have stated that they will hold meetings next week to decide on a plan of industrial action if their demands are not met.

South African traders impose lockout

Western Cape employers reacted to the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (Cosatu) campaign against job losses and a planned regional stay-away by locking workers out of their premises last week. Cosatu said before the action that thousands of workers were

expected to heed the stay-away call. A march held last week handed over a memorandum to business and government, demanding a halt to job losses.

The Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu), a Cosatu affiliate, said it was lodging an application in the labour court to indict employers who had instituted a lockout. Employers cannot legally lock out workers under the Labour Relations Act, but they may exclude them from the premises until they receive an undertaking to work normally. Fawu said most food companies had been affected by the lunchtime demonstrations. Employers had not anticipated the level of support and were caught off guard. KwaZulu-Natal will be the target of demonstrations next week.

The protests are to climax in a one-day national strike on May 10. Cosatu has also expressed dissatisfaction with pending amendments to labour laws. The ANC government has begun redrafting some of the laws introduced after the abolition of apartheid and changes to labour laws are due to be finished by August. Cosatu's refusal to mount any real struggle against the changes, limiting workers to isolated protests designed to let off steam, is giving employers the opportunity to press ahead with their offensive, even before the changes are complete.

Post-apartheid South Africa has shed half a million jobs since 1994, when it started opening its economy to global competition after decades of isolation and protectionism. One third of the workforce is unemployed. The legal changes will be combined with more dismissals and retrenchments, registration of employers and trade unions, and the creation of workplace forums. The latter are a means of fostering a feeling of common interest between workers and their employers, at a time when the gap between rich and poor is widening.

Liberian journalists stop news to protest censorship

Journalists belonging to the Liberian press union stopped news publications and broadcasts on Monday in protest at last week's "undemocratic closure" of two radio stations, Star Radio and Radio Veritas, by the government of President Charles Taylor.

Journalists prevented publication of Liberia's two main independent daily newspapers, the *Inquirer* and the *News*, and the privately-run Ducor radio station stopped broadcasting.

Frank Seinworla, secretary-general of the Press Union of Liberia, said, "We failed to come out on Monday because the government's action is undemocratic and intended to silence press freedom in the country." He said the newspapers participating in the news blackout would appear on Tuesday printed with white text on a black background, to keep up the protest against infringements of press freedom.

Taylor, whose election in 1997 officially ended the civil war he had begun in 1989, accused the media of harbouring "agents provocateurs" who used the news media, especially radio stations, to incite violence. He accused Star Radio, which was closed last Wednesday, of provoking security problems and waging a "cyber war" against Liberia by issuing negative reports from its Internet news service.

Press Union President Suah Deddeh was questioned by police on Friday following the closure of Star Radio, and only released the following day. Radio Veritas, which is run by the Roman Catholic Church, had its licence suspended. The government said it could start operating again if it provided a written assurance it would broadcast only religious material. Amnesty International denounced the closures.



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