

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

8 June 2000

German public sector workers set to vote for industrial action

German public sector workers are set to vote for strike action in a dispute over a new pay deal. Workers began to vote in a strike authorisation ballot on June 6. Around 3.1 million workers are involved in the dispute, including hospital workers, bus drivers, garbage collectors, sanitation workers and other public servants. A national strike by public sector employees would be the first since 1992.

The workers are members of the main public sector unions, including the ÖTV. Last week they rejected a pay increase recommended by union leaders of 1.8 percent this year and 2.2 percent in 2001. Workers have been campaigning for an increase of around 5 percent for this year alone. Herbert Mai, the leader of the ÖTV, said it was likely that the membership would vote for action but that he wished to continue negotiations with the government to prevent a strike.

Mai said, "A strike is not a revolution and does not mean the end of Germany. The employers have the opportunity to meet Chancellor Schroeder's wish to stop the strike."

The ÖTV stipulates that three-quarters of its members must approve strike action before it can be authorised. Another of the public sector unions, the DAG, requires a mandate of 70 percent.

German Interior Minister Otto Schily said there would be no further wage increases in the public sector. The strike ballot will be held until June 8 and, if successful, strikes are due to begin on June 13.

British teachers' union calls off strike ballot

On June 2, the National Union of Teachers executive overruled a vote by its membership to hold a ballot for industrial action against the introduction of performance-related pay. The NUT is the largest teaching union in Britain. Its annual conference in April voted for the strike ballot to be called. At that conference General Secretary Doug McAvoy stated that

he was against strike action and would campaign against a ballot being held. He labelled the conference vote "political posturing" and said it would antagonise parents. Following the union's decision not to hold a ballot, McAvoy sent a letter to the membership stating that the "union is now free of the distraction of a one-day strike".

Signalmen in Britain to hold strike vote

Signalmen employed by the national rail infrastructure company Railtrack are to hold a strike ballot over pay. The 7,000 workers rejected a company pay offer by a margin of 3 to 1.

Railtrack offered the signalmen a pay deal that they claim is worth 9 percent, or £1,600 a year. The workers, members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, said the deal was worth just 5 percent in real terms.

A spokesman for the union said, "Railtrack workers have seen the company make massive profits in recent years and directors have been given huge pay and bonus rises. Signal workers were traditionally the best-paid employees in the industry, but many drivers now earn substantially more. Over the past few years Railtrack employees' pay has fallen behind comparable grades in the railway industry and we are looking to redress the difference."

The result of the strike ballot will be announced at the end of the month. The last national strike by signalmen was in 1994 and disrupted rail services for several weeks.

Train drivers threaten to strike in Poland

On May 31, train drivers employed by Poland State Railways (PKP) threatened to strike if their benefits were not retained during the restructuring and privatisation of the company. The head of the drivers union said that if talks with PKP management on June 5 were not successful, a nation-wide strike would be called.

PKP is the largest employer in the country, with

190,000 workers. Much of Poland's freight and passenger transport is by rail. PKP plans to shed 50,000 jobs within the next three years and to split the company up into new divisions handling rail infrastructure, cargo operations, passenger services and other functions. The new divisions are scheduled to be privatised in 2002.

Rail unions are calling on the government to pass an emergency bill allowing for part of the PKP's 6.3 billion zloty (\$1.44 billion) debt to be written off. They are also campaigning for 15 percent of PKP's shares to be distributed to the workforce.

Nigerian workers strike against fuel price hike

Workers in Oyo State, Nigeria began industrial action Monday to protest a 50 percent hike in fuel prices. Protests continued in different parts of the state. Filling stations have stopped selling fuel and tanker drivers stopped lifting petroleum products at the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) depot in Apata.

In Ibadan, the Oyo State capital, the situation is tense, with no vehicles on the roads, while hundreds of commuters walk to work. Students at the Polytechnic in Ibadan also protested the price increase and mobilised traders and residents to join in opposing the hike. The students took possession of some vehicles and went round the city chanting anti-government slogans.

The situation in Lagos, the Nigerian capital, is similar. Chanting anti-government songs, students from the universities and colleges made bonfires at different points on the road. They denounced the price increase, saying it would further dehumanise the already impoverished masses. Vowing to continue the protests until the increases were reversed, they urged President Obasanjo to urgently address the situation.

The students denounced the government's poverty alleviation scheme as hypocrisy. The protests disrupted commercial activities along Bariga, Yaba, Ikorodu Road New Garage, Ifako and its environs, as commuters struggled over the few buses still on the roads.

The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) called on Saturday for a "sit-at-home" strike by Thursday this week unless the government reverses the 50 percent hike in petroleum prices. But the leader of the tanker drivers' union, NUPENG, made clear that he agreed with the need for the fuel price increase, saying,

"Honestly, as somebody in the industry, I know that it does not make economic sense to import and sell at [the previous price of] N20." His real complaint was that the government had failed to work through the unions. He said the government did not take the NLC into its confidence before making its decision, and this was why the union was taking action.

Union agrees to striking Nigerian civil servants being fired

The Enugu State government in Nigeria has threatened all its striking workers with losing their jobs unless they report for work by Monday this week. A press release signed by the Secretary to the Enugu State Government, Onyemuche Nnamani, gave details of an agreement between the state government, the Joint Negotiating Council and the State Administrative Council of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) on May 29, 2000. This included the following:

- * the government will release the names of those to be recalled into the state civil service;
- * all those not recalled are deemed as retired from the civil service;
- * the Enugu State government and the labour unions should establish a "good relationship for better cooperation and stability".

Nanmani stated that following this agreement the NLC had directed workers to resume duties immediately. He expressed disappointment that despite the "mutual understanding" some workers in the state have remained on strike, four days after the joint demand for a return to work.

Nanmani said that by June 5, 2000 any civil servant failing to start work would be assumed to have absconded from duty and would lose their job. He directed all liaison officers to open an attendance register, banned all gatherings in and around the premises of the state secretariat, and directed the police to arrest or disperse anybody found gathering at the state secretariat premises. Despite these threats, few resumed work on Monday.



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