

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

20 July 2000

Italian transport staff begin nation-wide strike action

Bus, tram and underground drivers in Naples began industrial action on July 17. The strike is the first of a series by workers in the Italian transport sector. The walkout lasted for four hours.

Transport workers throughout the country were due to join the dispute on July 19 and rail workers in Venice are to strike on July 21. The strikes are being held as a result of a new contract dispute involving 120,000 people employed in the public transport sector. Next week, a four-hour nation-wide air traffic controllers' strike is also due to take place.

The workers are striking now as Italian law forbids any transport strikes throughout the busy summer period. The ban on strikes runs from July 28 until early September.

Scottish ferry workers call off industrial action

A planned stoppage by Scottish P&O Ferry workers, who voted to strike this week and again on July 27, was called off after management made a new pay offer.

Officers on P&O ferries to the northern isles of Orkney and Shetland had voted 48-12 to reject an increased pay offer from company bosses and supported the two one-day strikes.

The strike was suspended July 18 by Numast, the Merchant Navy officers' union, after it accepted a new 2.5 percent pay offer from P&O managers following six hours of talks.

The 60 P&O officers first rejected a pay deal linked to inflation in November 1999. The most recent offer they rejected was also one of 2.5 percent. Numast said that strike activity had been suspended while their membership was consulted on the new offer.

Council workers in Scotland set to strike

Local government workers are set to go on strike after unions rejected a pay offer from the Convention of

Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) this week. COSLA offered a pay increase of 2.5 percent during negotiations with public sector unions who dismissed it as "derisory".

The industrial action could involve up to 120,000 workers. The largest public sector union, Unison, is to send out ballot papers to its 80,000 members this week. Unison is calling for a pay increase of 5 percent. Unison is calling for three different strikes, a one-day, a two-day and a three-day stoppage. The action would involve workers from throughout the public sector, including waste disposal and social workers.

The Transport and General Workers' Union and the GMB, who also have thousands of members working for local councils, are to send out strike ballot forms later this week.

Last month all three unions held "consultative ballots" of their members who proceeded to reject the offer of 2.5 percent. Council workers in England and Wales recently voted to accept a pay offer of just 3 percent.

The strike action ballot closes on August 14 and the result should be announced shortly thereafter.

Israeli doctors strike is settled

On July 13, Israeli doctors ended their 127-day strike after reaching an agreement with the government. The strike was called following a dispute over wage levels. The new deal gives doctors pay increases ranging from \$675 to \$950 a month. The doctors also won improved pension benefits and new limitations on the number of consecutive hours that they are allowed to work.

However, as part of the deal signed with the Finance Ministry, doctors' unions also agreed to a moratorium on strikes until 2010. The dispute had shut down all but emergency services in public hospitals.

Nigerian minimum wage strikes continue

Strike action is continuing in several of Nigeria's 36

states over the minimum wage issue. Last week, 16,000 workers in Sokoto state in the northern region began strike action, holding a religious protest against the local government. This included special prayer sessions and recitations of verses from the Qur'an in their demand for N6,500 rather than the N5,500 (\$55) a month on offer. In Lagos state indefinite strike action is continuing after violent police attacks on demonstrators in which one worker was killed. Continuing strikes are reported in Osun, Ogun and Oyo States.

Throughout the dispute, which has lasted for a month, local union leaders have attempted to make separate deals and to dissipate workers' increasing anger. An unnamed labour leader was quoted in the Nigerian newspaper the *Guardian* saying, "We are trying our best to see if we can persuade the governors to see the wisdom of setting this minimum wage without allowing it to get out of hand."

Nigerian President Olesgun Obasanjo announced the N5,500 minimum wage on Labour Day (May 1) but caused immediate controversy when he agreed to make N7,500 the minimum for federal workers. Unions agreed to a deal in which state workers would also receive N7,500 in wealthier Lagos and the oil-producing states, N6,500 in other states and N5,500 in the private sector. The compromise fell apart when some states said they could not afford the new rates.

State governors then took a united position, refusing to pay more than N5,500, which led to the strike action. In the last week, governors in several states have threatened to bring in rationalisations and sackings as the only way they will concede more than the N5,500 rate. Separate deals have now been made in at least two states. In Nasarawa state union leaders agreed to N6,000 a month and in Ondo state N6,500 was agreed.



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