

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

7 December 2000

Northern Irish postal workers end strike

Postal workers in Northern Ireland ended a six-day unofficial strike on December 5. The workers walked out in protest at the introduction 10 weeks ago of new methods of speeding mail through the system. The strike resulted in a build up of more than one million items of mail in the run up to the Christmas period. At its height more than 1,000 postal workers were involved in the action.

The Communications Workers Union opposed the action, which began following a breakdown in negotiations. The vote to return to work by the staff was not unanimous and it is reported that the strike may resume in the New Year.

Taxi drivers in Ireland continue dispute

The National Taxi Drivers' Union, the Irish Taxi Drivers' Federation and drivers in the SIPTU trade union voted overwhelmingly to continue strike action earlier this week. In an attempt to break the strike, Noel Hanlon, chairman of Aer Rianta, which owns Dublin Airport, had called an emergency meeting of the company's board to discuss opening the Airport up to Hackney (Black cab) taxi drivers. However the company has decided to await the Irish High Court's ruling on a legal challenge brought by the drivers against the plans to deregulate their industry.

Postal workers in England vote to strike

Postal workers at the Royal Mail's main centre in Filton, Bristol, this week voted to take strike action. The workers are in dispute with the Royal Mail over the timetable for increased overtime rates. The Communication Workers' Union called the ballot for industrial action, which was supported by a margin of six to one. The first 24-hour stoppage is planned for December 12, with a further strike the following week if the demands are not met. The Filton sorting office is one of the largest in the country and a strike there would have a severe impact on mail delivery all over the southeast region.

Luton Airport staff vote for action

Staff at Luton Airport are to strike in the run-up to the holiday period in a dispute over pay cuts.

Employees including porters, cleaners, security guards and others voted by 254 to 152 to take industrial action. The workers, members of the Transport & General Workers Union, have reported that some have seen their pay slashed by 50 percent as a result of cost cutting measures. A number of security guards claim that their pay will be cut from £21,000-a-year to £14,000-a-year, under new proposals.

The TGWU is set to announce the date of the strike in the next few days. The action could close the airport, the seventh busiest in England, but the TGWU have stated that they are not opposed to pay cuts in general. TGWU national official George Ryde said that the union has "proposed a pragmatic maximum limit on pay cuts within the existing cost base but the airport management refused to agree an acceptable compromise".

Portuguese copper workers to strike

On December 4, copper workers at the Portuguese state-owned Neves Corvo copper mine voted to strike from December 14 in a dispute over pay and union representation. The action is in protest at the sacking of a union leader at the mine. No time scale was set for the strike's duration, but miners are to hold a demonstration in the capital Lisbon on December 15.

South Africa: Public Sector workers suspend action

More than 40,000 public sector workers took strike action in Johannesburg and Cape Town on Friday December 1 against the ANC government's Igoli 2002 privatisation plans. In Johannesburg members of the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) and the Independent Municipal Allied Workers Trade Union (Imatu) decided on an indefinite strike, because the local council is refusing to guarantee full employment to those workers who lose their jobs in

failed privatisation ventures. Over 20,000 strikers in Johannesburg assembled at the Library Gardens but were refused permission to march to the metro centre to hand in a memorandum against privatisation. The council said the ban was due to "ongoing investigations" into a "rampage" which they claimed had occurred during a previous demonstration.

By Tuesday December 5, Samwu and Imatu agreed to call off the Johannesburg strike after the council had threatened to sack those in dispute under the Labour Relations Act which prohibits essential service workers from striking. Samwu said that it had a local agreement in place for a skeleton staff to maintain essential services, but this had not been ratified at a national level.

In Cape Town about 18,000 workers marched to the council offices. Samwu said that if the newly elected council, which meets December 14, did not agree to their demands there would be further strike action.

Nigerian doctors continue strike

Doctors on strike since September say they will ignore a government deadline to end their action or face the sack. Rejecting the government's pay offer, Ikpeeme A. Ikpeeme, president of the National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD), said that the strike would continue until their key demands were met. A doctor at the Lagos Teaching Hospital said that "doctors grouped under NARD consider their action a strong medicine necessary to prevent a more devastating plague: total collapse of the health system."

Although Nigeria's health service expanded in the oil boom period of the 1970s, austerity measures were imposed by the military rulers from 1984 onwards, especially under the IMF Structural Adjustment Programme of 1987. As well as the funds to run hospitals, doctors' earnings were also held down with the result that thousands left for jobs in the United States, Europe and the Gulf States. The Nigerian Medical Association estimates that over 28,000 Nigerian doctors are practicing abroad and only 14,000 at home. NARD members, unable to take action under the military regime without facing severe repression, had hoped that under President Obasanjo they could press for improvements. One doctor is reported as saying, "What we didn't reckon with is that it is still the same people who ran the health ministry bureaucracy under the military who are there now."

Another section of doctors, those employed by the Lagos State government, are also threatening strike action over allowances for call-duty. Their organisation, the Medical Guild, supports the NARD action. A Medical Guild statement said, "It is shocking to us that the Federal Ministry of Health does not take into account the plight of the teeming masses of Nigeria that use these hospitals. We also note the misinformation and propaganda being used against them [NARD] by the government. Mere rhetoric and propaganda will not arrest the downward spiral in the level of health care delivery in Nigeria."



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