

Workers Struggles: Europe, Africa and the Middle East

1 February 2001

French workers protest pension changes

Last week, French workers staged a series of protests against plans to raise the age of retirement above 60 years old. The protests, which swept the country, caused severe disruption and brought Paris, Lyon, Marseilles and Montpellier to a standstill.

The Employers' Federation wants employees to make pension contributions for 45 years before they are guaranteed a full pension, rather than 40 years, as is presently the case.

Talks between the Employers Federation and the trade unions over the plan broke down before Christmas, sparking the protests. The unions have said that they are not opposed to the changes in principle, but do not believe the Employers Federation has acted responsibly.

The protests brought together tens of thousands of public and private sector workers. Public transport was severely affected by the action. Train services between several towns were disrupted. Airports were also affected as some domestic flights were cancelled. At least one national radio station had to reschedule its programmes because of protesting staff.

London Underground threaten court action against planned strikes

Management at London Underground, the capital's train network, is to take legal action against the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) to prevent a series of strikes.

A ballot of 9,000 union members on the Underground belonging to the RMT and the train drivers' union Aslef returned overwhelming support for a series of three one-day strikes. The ballot was prompted by concerns at the upcoming privatisation of LU and its impact on safety.

London Underground has taken the RMT to the High Court, in a bid to block the strike, claiming the RMT ballot was "invalid." Regardless of the outcome of the

court case, Aslef, whose ballot has not been contested, says it intends to go ahead with the action, with the first walkout planned for next Monday.

With over three million passenger journeys a day being made on the "Tube," any strike could severely affect businesses operating in the capital.

Thousands strike against local authority budget cuts in east London

Schools and libraries have been closed in east London, as thousands of council workers began a three-day strike against public spending cuts. Up to 4,000 social workers, administration and housing staff employed by Hackney Local Authority are involved in the action.

Unions say that plans to cut millions from the authority's budget will result in hundreds of job losses, pay cuts of up to £2,000 (\$2,900) per annum and the running down of employment conditions.

Hackney council reported that the action had closed 10 schools, several libraries and a sports centre. Workers are set to stage a march before handing in a petition to 10 Downing Street demanding the spending cuts be halted.

Rolls-Royce workers vote for industrial action

Workers at a Rolls-Royce engineering plant in Coventry, England have voted to strike in protest at threatened job losses. Management has threatened to cut 1,300 jobs at the Ansty plant and transfer production to Canada and other UK factories.

The Manufacturing Science and Finance union says its members voted 4-1 in favour of a walkout. The action will begin next week, unless last-minute talks between unions and management reach agreement.

Zimbabwe civil servants strike

Government services and schools ground to a halt Wednesday last week, as thousands of civil servants went on an indefinite strike to press the government for

a salary increase of up to 80 percent. Workers have rejected a 15 percent pay increase.

The civil service employs more than 155 000, but the army, police and health personnel did not take part in the strike as their salaries are reviewed separately from other government workers.

VW told to re-hire sacked South African workers

Volkswagen SA has been told by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) to re-employ the 1, 300 workers sacked from the company's Uitenhage plant in February 2000. The CCMA ruled on Tuesday last week that VW's dismissal of the workers for taking strike action against the undemocratic practices of their union Numsa was fair, but the procedures followed by the company were unfair.

The company was told to re-employ all the workers by February 5. VW is contesting the ruling.

Israel faces general strike situation

Israel faced a general strike situation last week, as much of the public sector struck in a pay dispute with the government. The action was called by the labour federation Histadrut after the government rejected demands for a six percent wage rise, offering just three percent.

The strike brought most of Israel's largest cities to a near halt in the last few days. Garbage collection had been halted, leading to tons of rubbish piling up in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa. Municipal services were closed to the public and municipal transport to nursery schools suspended. Government offices were also closed to the public, and the issuing of passports and identity cards halted.

Action by staff at Ben-Gurion Airport, near Tel Aviv, forced the cancellation of most outgoing flights. Some incoming flights were allowed to land, but passengers had to leave without their luggage as the baggage handlers were on strike. Many foreign airlines cancelled flights to Israel for fear that their planes would be unable to take off again.

Train services were completely suspended and all ports were on strike, except for the loading and unloading of agricultural products. More than 50 ships carrying nearly £125 million worth of goods remained stranded out at sea near Israel's two main ports, Haifa and Ashdod.

Hospital staff at several clinics and outpatient units were also on strike. The education system remained

functioning but without the assistance of school secretaries, janitors, laboratory workers and other administrative employees.

After urgent talks between the union and Treasury, it was announced late Tuesday night that a settlement may be made—the union reportedly close to agreeing a 3.6 percent increase.



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