

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

29 March 2001

Transport workers in France strike to demand better pay and retirement packages

French transport workers have launched a series of strikes this week. The workers' demands range from calls for a younger retirement age to higher pay and better retirement packages.

On March 26, strikes buses and subway services in 30 cities across France including Marseilles, Strasbourg, Lyon and Bordeaux, were brought to a standstill. One of the cities most affected by the strike was the southern port city of Marseilles, where no buses, subways or trams ran. The following day the strike halted services in 12 cities and towns across the country. The transport workers are calling for the right to retire at 55 instead of 60.

Transport services were largely unaffected in Paris but the capital could be hit by a nation-wide strike on March 29, by employees at SNCF, France's national rail authority. The workers are calling for higher pay and better retirement packages.

French Transport minister Jean-Claude Gayssot stated this week that he would participate in negotiations with union leaders and transport authority management due to begin in April.

German airline workers strike prior to new contract

Workers employed by the German airline took strike action on March 23 in a "warning strike" prior to negotiations over a new contract that will include a new wage structure. The strike was called by ver.di, the new service sector union. The majority of Lufthansa flights at all German airports were affected by the strike, resulting in many delays and cancellations.

In an effort to minimise the impact of the industrial action, the company urged passengers booked on early-morning internal flights to take the train instead. To facilitate this an agreement was made to have air tickets accepted by the German railway for the duration of the strike.

London Underground workers to strike after union/management talks fail

Negotiations between Rail, Maritime and Transport union officials and London Underground management broke down

without agreement on March 27. The talks were aimed at averting a planned 24-hour strike by RMT members on London Underground from midnight on March 28. The strikes are the latest in a protracted dispute over fears that safety will be compromised and jobs affected by government plans to finance the Underground system through a public-private partnership.

Union officials had been involved in the negotiations with London Underground managers at the conciliation service Acas all day but were unable to reach an agreement. The strike will now go ahead and it is estimated that 40 percent of Tube trains will be halted by the action, resulting in station closures for the duration of the strike.

Bob Crow, the RMT assistant general secretary, said that management were adopting "bullying tactics" by threatening action against RMT members who refused to cross picket lines during a strike by train drivers last month. Crow said, "These bullying tactics do not augur well for reaching a settlement. We cannot proceed with meaningful negotiations until this threat is lifted."

Italian bank announces more lay-offs

Banca Intesa, Italy's largest banking group, confirmed on Monday that it would cut 2,500 jobs. This is on top of an earlier announcement of retrenchments, taking the total number of job losses planned by the end of 2003 to 10,500.

The group had previously announced that 7,900 jobs would go, but said on Monday that it would shed a further 800 posts in its international network and confirmed that 1,700 more would go because of the sale earlier this year of Bank Carime. The bank also confirmed it had cut 3,871 jobs in 2000 and that the "cull" was ahead of schedule.

Banca Intesa last week said that net profit in 2000 rose 34 per cent to E1.46bn (\$1.3bn) and predicted further growth this year thanks to cost-cutting at its three main bank units. Intesa plans to make the improvements from streamlining operations among Banco Ambrosiano Veneto, Cariplo and Banca Commerciale Italiana.

The banking group is seeking a return on equity of more than 20 per cent in 2003, against 13.5 per cent last year, and a cost-income ratio below 50 per cent, compared with last

year's 64 per cent. The amalgamation of the three banks' back-office operations is said to be crucial to Intesa's plans for further acquisitions in Italy.

Israeli Transport Ministry workers on strike

Transport Ministry workers intensified their work protests this week - launching an "unlimited strike" that will paralyse motor vehicle bureaus and prevent people from taking theory or on-the-road driving tests. The ministry's workers said they would also refuse to answer phones or pass on mail or documents to their superiors.

The chairman of the national committee of Transport Ministry workers, Mike Levin, said yesterday that the workers had decided to announce the strike because no progress had been made in the past month of negotiations between the ministry and the Histadrut labour federation.

The workers want the government to rescind its decision to scrap 100 posts in the Transport Ministry. In addition they are demanding that more workers be given the right to get cars as a perk and that more promotions be made within the civil aviation authority and the motor vehicle bureau. They are also protesting the cost of outsourcing of some data services of the ministry.

Airports will also be affected by the strike as workers refuse to conduct standard airport and aircraft checks. Despite this the ministry said it would make every effort to minimise the effect of the strike on the public.

900 Kenyan tea-pickers sacked for going on strike

More than 900 tea-pickers at Kalilana Tea Estate, Limuru, Kenya were sacked at the end of last week, after they went on strike over poor salaries. The workers were protesting at the company's refusal to implement a court order giving them a 12 per cent salary increase.

Management closed down all production indefinitely — both factory operations and fieldwork. Workers were evicted from their homes and ordered to quit within seven hours. This decision was reached after a lengthy closed-door meeting between the management and senior security officers from Kiambu District.

Earlier, the management had accused the workers of damaging property worth millions of shillings, and had brought in riot police. Scores of workers and police officers were injured during the clashes. Company vehicles including a tractor were damaged.

Zimbabwean doctors on strike

Junior and middle-level doctors at the Zimbabwe's two largest referral hospitals have been on indefinite strike since Friday last week. The doctors at Parirenyatwa and Harare hospitals are angry with the Public Service Commission (PSC) for holding up payment of on-call allowances — a problem that they have been raising for a long time. They accuse the authorities of reneging on a promise to increase

their allowances, and of negotiating in bad faith. They are also demanding a pay rise to compensate for high inflation. The government has refused to accede to their demands.

"Government should resolve this issue once and for all," said a nurse at Parirenyatwa hospital about the current strike. "We can't afford to be a nation of industrial actions all the time because of bureaucracy."

At Harare Hospital, only emergency cases are being attended to with many patients are being turned away. The strikers say that the strike could have been averted if the PSC had acted swiftly. Senior doctors and consultants are now attending to only the most serious cases. Zimbabwe's Deputy Health Minister David Parirenyatwa, touring hospitals on Sunday, admitted the situation was critical but claimed that the medical institutions were treating all cases.

MIDROC workers in Ethiopia resume strike

After having made an agreement on Tuesday March 20 to end their 26-day-long strike, MIDROC construction workers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, have now resumed their strike. Management refused to sign an agreement, claiming that it is suspended until the strikers sign new job contracts.

The strike was called off when workers were told by the union that they had reached an agreement with MIDROC, who had promised to resolve the problems behind the strike. Workers returned to work, expecting the agreement to be followed. Soon after, it became clear that the union had accepted verbal assurances. Having secured a return to work, the management was suspending any agreement until the workers accepted new contracts.

Under the new contract, 80 percent of the workers who were previously employed on regular basis are asked to sign on as contract workers. MIDROC justifies this precondition by claiming that five years ago, when the company was formed after a split with its parent company, ALTAD, no new contracts were signed. It claims that for the past five years it has been paying workers who were employed under non-renewed contracts.



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