

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

3 May 2001

France: Transport workers continue strike action for lower retirement age

French transport workers continued a campaign to lower their retirement age from 60 to 55, holding a further 24-hour strike on May 2. The strike is the fourth such stoppage in five weeks and affected 50 cities throughout the country. However, Paris was not affected by the industrial action, as transport workers in the capital already have the right to retire at 55.

The strike hit bus and rail services in major cities such as Lyon, Strasbourg, Bordeaux and Grenoble. In Marseille, France's second largest city, it was reported that only 27 buses were running, underground train services were down to just a third of the normal schedule and no tram services were in operation.

Greek workers hold general strike in protest against attacks on pensions and retirement age

On April 26, workers in Greece held a 24-hour general strike in opposition to proposed government plans to cut pension levels and increase the minimum retirement age to 65. The strike was called by Greek trade unions in both private and public sectors.

The PASOK government under Prime Minister Costas Simitis argued that the measures would help to prevent many pension funds from going bankrupt. The government has since backed down on implementing the proposals but the strike still proceeded as planned.

The stoppage hit public transport, air travel and all essential public services. Schools and government offices closed for the day and industrial action by journalists led to television and radio stations cancelling all newscasts and current affairs programmes. Newspapers were also hit, with several editions failing to hit the streets. Flights by the state carrier Olympic Airways were severely disrupted by the action. The airline cut down its flights to just one per country and one for each domestic location.

Scottish NHS medical secretaries strike in dispute over pay grades

Medical secretaries and other National Health Service staff in the west of Scotland held a series of

demonstrations and protests over pay on April 30. The workers, who earn an average of just £11,500 a year, want to see a reduction in pay differentials between grades. For example, secretaries employed by hospital consultants receive less pay than assistants to some senior doctors.

During the protests more than 100 workers blockaded the headquarters of the Greater Glasgow Health Board in the Charing Cross area of the city. A further 80 workers, including five consultants held a protest outside Hairmyres Hospital in East Kilbride. The hospital was opened several weeks ago and was built and financed by the new Private Finance Initiative.

Workers are to be balloted by the Unison public sector union for a proposed strike over the secretaries' pay grades.

Britain's TUC asks London Underground union to call off strike

On May 2, the Trade Union Congress called on London Underground workers to halt a planned 24-hour strike due to start later that evening.

The strike is due to be held by members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) in a long-running dispute against government plans to partially privatise the "Tube" network. The RMT has stated that such plans jeopardise safety on the Underground.

The RMT has been in negotiations this week with London Underground management in a bid to reach an agreement, but the union rejected a proposed settlement on May 1. The RMT said the proposals still failed to address their concerns over safety. The other union involved in the dispute, train drivers' union ASLEF, has accepted the management proposals.

TUC General Secretary John Monks told the RMT that if the strike went ahead, London Underground would withdraw its proposals. Monks called on the RMT to continue talks with London Underground, and has also asked the RMT leadership to meet with the TUC Executive Committee over the dispute.

Monks said, "I would wish to assist further in exploring these points and seeking to resolve any outstanding

difficulties. I fear however that this would not be possible if RMT proceeds with the planned one-day strike today. Indeed London Underground have made clear that the current proposed agreement, with the important guarantees it provides will no longer be on the table if the strike goes ahead”.

South African local government workers protest low wages

Over 17,000 members of the South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) staged nationwide protests yesterday to support a demand for a 10 percent wage increase, against management's five percent offer.

More than 1,000 workers braved heavy rain and took to Bloemfontein's streets during the protests. "To hell with five percent—it's war," read a poster carried by protesters in Bloemfontein. Other cities that experienced major protests included East London and Kimberley, where around 600 workers took part in each of the protest marches.

In a memorandum presented to management, the marchers urged continuation of wage negotiations in good faith. Most municipal workers, the document stated, live in abject poverty while inflation eats into their already low wages. "Every day we hear of petrol increases, food prices going up, school fees having to be paid and clothes put on our backs," the memo states. "The African National Congress promised in the local government elections held in December last year it would do everything in its power to eradicate poverty. The minimum wage of 1,600 rand [\$200] is not enough for dogs, let alone humans," it stated. Officials in Kimberley and East London were presented with similar memorandums.

The parties are to meet again on Friday next week for the second round of mediation talks. If these fail, arbitration would follow.

Samwu spokeswoman Anna Weekes said the union was demanding a 2,000 rand-a-month minimum wage against management's offer of 1,600. She said the offer was, in effect, three percent below the inflation rate, and that many workers were finding it hard to make ends meet on their current wage. "Management's R1, 600 offer is like a starvation wage because it is still more than R300 short of what is actually needed for the whole family to survive. We are also demoralised by government's R550 million [\$69m] grant to the Johannesburg council for privatisation, when they can't even spare a cent for employees."

Port workers strike in Sierra Leone

A strike called by the port workers union brought the Sierra Leone Ports Authority (SLPA) to a halt last week. The strike action came as a result of management's refusal to make good its promise to pay back workers' money from their provident fund.

The workers had been told that the provident fund would be converted into a social security fund to be controlled by government, but that before the fund was transferred, workers would receive fifty percent of what they had invested in the fund.

The management even went ahead and issued pay slips to the workers, giving them the hope that they would receive the money they had paid into the fund. However, when workers reported for work on Tuesday April 17, instead of receiving the promised monies they were told that the legal adviser of the authority, Mr U Barrie, had advised against paying them.

"Why did they raise our hopes when they knew that they had not consulted with the lawyer," the infuriated workers asked. Some of the workers were quoted saying, "They want to use the money to do business".

Strike by health workers in Niger

Health workers in Niger embarked on a three-day strike on Thursday last week, to press for higher wages and better working conditions. The Health and Social Workers Union has been pressing the government since January to remove the ban on promotions and seniority allowances. The union has also been asking the government to confirm the employment of workers recruited between 1998-2000, and to organise upgrading examinations for maintenance and orthopaedic employees.

The strike slowed down treatment for patients, although a minimum service was available in several child health centres, dispensaries, maternity wards and hospitals.

This was the second such strike this year; the first three-day stoppage took place from 31 January to 2 February. Niger is currently facing outbreaks of meningitis and measles.



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