

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

24 May 2001

Strikes bring Greece to standstill

Greece was brought to a standstill last week as the second general strike in under a month swept the country. Protests against government proposals to make changes to the pay-as-you-go pensions system paralysed public transport, the civil service and businesses. In the capital, the normally busy streets of Athens emptied as buses, taxis, trolley buses and the metro shut down.

Olympic Airways, the national airline, reduced flights to only one per destination while ferries to the islands remained in port. Schools, hospitals and other government agencies were shut or running on skeleton staff. State television was off air, while radio played only music and taped messages from journalists explaining their strike. Major Greek tourist attractions were also closed as guards at the Acropolis joined the strike.

Around 10,000 people were reported to have gathered in central Athens to march on the parliament. The government's popularity has sunk to record lows, and for the first time one poll showed the Conservative opposition leader Costas Karmanlis on a par with Socialist Party Prime Minister Costas Simitis.

Greece is under pressure from the European Union to speed structural reform and reduce public debt after joining the single currency euro zone in January. George Zannias, a government adviser on pension reform, said: "We've been slow to make clear the size and the urgency of the problem. But there's no going back. The actuarial study shows that without reform the pay-as-you-go system faces collapse at the end of this decade."

Italian workers strike to demand wage increases

Thousands of workers marched through a number of Italian cities last week demanding wage increases. The strikes, organised before the recent elections, are the first in a planned series of actions as 6.5 million workers seek to renegotiate pay settlements.

New Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's previous administration was dogged by protests against pension reform. "Comrade Berlusconi—we've done our part, now you sign the contract!" read one banner, referring to

Berlusconi's "Contract with Italy," which he signed in a pre-election pledge. The contract includes \$30 billion tax cuts and 1.5 million new jobs over the next five years.

Strikes by Alitalia pilots, flight attendants and ground workers caused major air travel disruption in Italy on May 21, forcing the cancellation of hundreds of flights across the country. Air traffic controllers at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport also staged an eight-hour walkout. Alitalia refused to say how many flights were cancelled or delayed, but the ANSA news agency calculated that around 50 percent of flights might have been cancelled by the end of the day.

In Rome, nearly 250 flights were expected to be cancelled, while others faced up to seven-hour delays.

In Malpensa, Milan's hub, 144 flights coming or going were cancelled, while about 60 flights faced cancellation in another Milan airport, Linate. Airports in Florence, Pisa and Bologna all had to cancel dozens of flights, including international ones. Italy's largest private airline, Meridiana, was also forced to cancel and delay flights due to a four-hour, nation-wide strike by pilots and flight attendants.

French transport workers strike in campaign to lower retirement age

On May 22 transport workers in France continued their campaign of industrial action to demand the right to retire at 55 years of age instead of 60. The strike was the sixth work stoppage in seven weeks. The action did not affect the capital, Paris, where workers already have the right to retire at 55.

The stoppages disrupted bus and tram services in many French cities. In Marseilles, France's second-largest city, only 12 out of 400 city buses ran during the stoppage. There were no tram services and subway services have been reduced. In the northern cities of Lille and Valenciennes no buses ran at all. Other cities affected by the action included Lyon, Nantes, Toulouse and Nice.

Workers and management have met on several occasions to discuss the employees' demands but have been unable to reach an agreement.

Lecturers take strike action in England to demand pay increase

On May 22, further education lecturers in England struck for 24 hours in a dispute over pay. The lecturers are calling for a pay increase of £3,000 pay increase. The action was called by the further education union NATFHE and affected around 290 colleges around England. Some two million students were affected.

A spokesman for the union said, "Lecturers have made the case not only for parity with schoolteachers who earn 10 percent more but also for the need for funding for the forgotten sector. People are just sick and tired of the way they are being treated. They feel they have done their bit—there are 70 percent more students and their teaching hours have gone up by about four hours a week."

The union has said that more industrial action could take place following its annual conference in Scarborough this weekend. NATFHE has 42,000 members, of whom 30,000 voted in the ballot, with 65 percent in favour of a strike.

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers condemned the stoppage, stating that low pay did not warrant strike action. The Professional Association of Teachers, which has a no-strike agreement with employers, also opposed the strike.

Postal workers in UK take unofficial strike action

Postal workers employed by the Royal Mail across the UK are currently involved in strike action in a dispute over changes to working practices. The action began on May 18 when 800 staff walked off the job in Watford in south England. It subsequently spread to Liverpool, Chester, Stockport, Birkenhead, North Wales and parts of London as 6,000 workers at these depots refused to handle mail diverted from Watford and begun unofficial action. The strike was ongoing as of May 23, and a large backlog of mail had already begun to pile up.

The Royal Mail's managing director of service delivery complained, "It is totally unacceptable that union members are attempting to hold customers to ransom by denying them a service. Why can't the strikers make their case to the independent review team instead of denying customers a service?" The UCW postal union and Royal Mail parent company Consignia had recently established a new independent review team to look into industrial relations in the postal service, where 63,000 working days have been lost during the past year in mainly wildcat actions. The review was set up to "modernise" working practices in line with opening the postal service up to competition.

South African striking miners confronted by police

About 661 members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) went on strike last week at the state-owned Alexcor Diamond Mine at Alexander Bay in Northern Cape, South Africa. The NUM said that management's failure to consult the union over issues concerning the workers was the cause of the strike, citing issues such as unfair application of the "no work, no pay principle", biased allocation of housing and appointment of senior staff.

Outside the mine, police used stun grenades, teargas and rubber bullets against the strikers. Two miners sustained head and back injuries were treated at the local clinic and discharged the same day. A policeman was also taken to the clinic.

Zambian teachers and civil servants strike over pay increase

Zambian teachers, who went on strike last week to demand a salary increase, are to continue their action, according to Alfred Chibuye, the Lusaka district chairman of the Secondary Schools Teachers' Union of Zambia (SEZTUZ). Chibuye said the teachers had rejected the 25 percent salary increase offered by the government and were also demanding housing, medical and education allowances.

All the Lusaka-based branches of the Civil Servants Union of Zambia (CSUZ) and the National Union of Public Service Workers (NUPSW) also struck on Monday to demand a 100 percent salary increase before May. CSUZ secretary general Darrison Chala said, "There is no way they [the members] can accept something below 100 per cent. We have really tried to control the workers. Three years have passed without a strike."



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