

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

12 July 2001

Italian workers hold strikes over pay and conditions

A wave of industrial action swept throughout Italy on July 6. The biggest protests took place in the northern cities of Milan and Turin. In Milan, an estimated 60,000 members of the metalworkers' union FIOM paraded through the streets carrying banners demanding larger pay increases in negotiations now under way with their employers. The metalworkers are traditionally Italy's most powerful group of workers. More than 1.5 million belong to several unions and organisers said 250,000 had participated in Friday's protests.

The metalworkers' stoppages follow strikes in May, when some 50,000 held a half-day protest over the employers' failure to offer further concessions in the current round of wage negotiations. Metalworkers form the largest group among 5.5 million Italian workers who have yet to strike pay deals for this year—46 percent of all wage contracts negotiated at the national level.

"The goal of the contract renegotiations has not been reached and that's why [the unions] are on strike," said Sergio Cofferati, the head of CGIL, Italy's largest union confederation with around 5.3 million members.

In Turin, the headquarters of many of Italy's largest manufacturers, more than 30,000 workers stopped work, disrupting production at several major plants including the Fiat automobile group. Similar marches were held in Rome, Bologna, Florence, Genoa and several southern cities including Palermo in Sicily.

Italy's air traffic was also paralysed, as a series of overlapping pay strikes by air traffic controllers, pilots and flight attendants hit the country. Foreign airlines, including British Airways and Air France—which have just struck a deal to form a global commercial alliance with Alitalia—were forced to cancel flights to and from Italy. Air traffic controllers from CILA-AV and other unions stopped work for 10 hours, and some Alitalia

flight attendants and pilots struck for eight hours, causing the cancellation of 342 flights—or 76 percent of the total number of flights scheduled nationwide—including 192 domestic and 150 international flights.

Fire fighters in Merseyside, England set to strike this week

Fire fighters on Merseyside are set to begin strike action on July 13 for an eight-day period in a dispute with the Merseyside Fire Authority over the recruitment of non-uniformed staff to senior posts.

On July 5, Fire Brigade Union members on Merseyside, including officers and station staff, voted to support the strike by an 82.7 percent majority in favour.

Chief Fire Officer Malcolm Saunders had proposed the plan to open up more senior grades to outsiders. Talks between union representatives and management broke down acrimoniously on July 10 without reaching a settlement.

If the strike goes ahead as planned, the British Army will provide fire cover using its "Green Goddesses" (army fire trucks), which were last used on Merseyside during a fire fighters' strike in 1996.

The Merseyside Fire Authority had originally tried to prevent the ballot being held, requesting the High Court issue an injunction. It later withdrew its application after being forced to accept that the ballot and vote for industrial action were legal. The union has stated that the employment of non-uniformed and untrained staff in mid-management roles threatens the stability of the fire service in the region.

Spanish airline pilots continue ongoing strike

On July 10, pilots employed by the Spanish airline Iberia struck for 24 hours in an ongoing dispute over a new contract and to demand a 20 percent increase in pay. The pilots claim that the company has broken a 1995 agreement on wages and are also demanding better pension rights. The 1,875 pilots involved are

members of the Sepla trade union.

The latest stoppage, the third this summer, resulted in the airline cancelling some 230 flights to destinations worldwide. An Iberian spokeswoman said that 22.5 percent of its scheduled 1,022 flights had to be cancelled. Most of the cancelled flights were to European cities. The strike action followed a breakdown in negotiations on July 9. The union has warned that strikes may take place later in July and August.

London postal workers union call off strike following legal threat

On July 5, the Communication Workers Union called off a planned strike by postal staff in London. The strike was to be held in opposition to the Royal Mail's planed closure of the North London mail centre in Almeida Street.

The union called off the action when Royal Mail threatened to take it to court. The company has refused to discuss the issue of the future employment of those currently employed at the mail centre, according to the union. A spokesman for the Royal Mail said, "We have been speaking to the unions over the last few days and made it clear we were quite prepared to go to court to stop their illegal strike."

Cleaning staff at Wimbledon tennis tournament stage protest over low pay

On July 6, union members and officials from Battersea and Wandsworth staged a protest outside the grounds of the Wimbledon tennis tournament in London, to draw attention to the drop in wages of cleaners at the game's most prestigious tournament. Cleaners at Wimbledon have seen their pay drop as the result of the cleaning contract being awarded to a different company this year.

The contract had previously been awarded to Equity Cleaning Services, which paid its staff £6 an hour. This year, however, it went to the Australian firm Cleanevent, which pays just £4 an hour, (around the price of two bowls of the All England Clubs' famous strawberries and cream). A cleaner, who wished to remain anonymous, said a number of her colleagues had resigned in protest.

Greek airline technical support staff set date for strike

Technical support staff at Olympic Airways in Athens were set to stage a 24-hour strike on July 11 to

protest plans to sell a majority stake in the debt-ridden national carrier. The strike decision was arrived at a day after the government named Axon airlines, a private Greek carrier, as the preferred bidder to purchase the stake. Negotiations are also to be held with two other bidders, Cyprus Airways and Australia's Integrated Airline Solutions.

Airline technical workers, who number about 1,000 people, are demanding that Olympic is not sold and that more staff are hired. A strike last month forced Olympic to cancel more than 40 of its 70 planned domestic and international flights.

Nurses strike throughout Nigeria

A national strike of over 200,000 nurses and midwives that began Monday this week is bringing public hospitals to a standstill throughout Nigeria. Most new cases are being turned away and existing patients that are not in a critical condition are being sent home. Hospitals in Abuja, Kaduna in the north, Enugu in the southeast and in Abeokuta, the Ogun State capital, are affected although the strike has not yet begun in some areas, including Lagos.

It is only a month since doctors in Nigeria's federal and state hospitals ended a three-week strike after the government conceded pay increases, full payment of retirement benefits and payment of arrears for on-call duty allowances. News reports claimed that hundreds of people died during the strike action because they could not afford treatment in the private sector.

The National Association of Nigeria Nurses and Midwives (NANNM) is striking over pay and conditions. They point out that the Nigerian government reneged on a commitment to a 60 percent increase in shift allowances that led to the suspension of strike action in August last year. A similar increase awarded to the doctors after their recent action was not extended to nurses. The health service in Nigeria has been allowed to run down over decades, with many doctors and nurses emigrating to the West.



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