

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

30 August 2001

Scottish medical secretaries strike over pay

On August 29, medical secretaries at four Scottish hospitals began five days of strike action in a dispute over pay. The strike involves some 300 members of the public service workers' union, Unison and is located at the North Glasgow Hospital Trust. The nurses are striking at Glasgow's Royal Infirmary, Western Infirmary, Stobhill Hospital and Gartnavel General. The action is set to disrupt theatre lists and test results for thousands of patients. The union and hospital trust agreed in advance that emergency services would not be affected.

Currently the nurses are paid on the same scale as an ordinary desk secretary. They are demanding more, insisting their role requires more responsibility and a degree of medical knowledge in order to deal with doctors and patients' paperwork. Some of their work entails transcribing important information about drugs and dosage for doctors. The medical secretaries are currently a grade below management secretaries and earn about £2,000 less per year.

This is the second strike that the secretaries have held this summer. A three-day strike took place at the beginning of August, following a ballot supported by more than 91 percent of the workers. The medical secretaries are due to hold a demonstration in Glasgow city centre on September 1.

London underground workers set to strike over pay

London Underground workers are to be balloted for strike action in a long running dispute over pay. Underground management and the Rail Maritime and Transport union were set to meet on August 29 in an attempt to reach a settlement. The union has set these talks as the deadline for an agreement to be reached, otherwise it will sanction a strike ballot.

The dispute began in April and London Underground has offered a pay increase of just three percent. An independent report on Underground workers pay

reported that the pay increase should be around four percent.

Two-day general strike goes ahead in South Africa

South Africa has been hit by a two-day general strike against the African National Congress (ANC) government's privatisation programme. The strike was called by the 1.8 million-strong Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) for August 29 and 30. Reports indicate that the strike has received wide support, reducing most cities, including Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban and Nelspruit, to ghost towns.

Taxi and rail services have been disrupted. Gold mines and car factories are closed. Schools are deserted, not just because of the absence of teaching staff but because pupils have supported the strike call. A head teacher at a Soweto school told Reuters, "there are no classes at the moment because learners have not come in."

Cosatu General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi said before the strike that he expected four million people would participate, including 1.8 million Cosatu members. The unions claim that since 1994, privatisation has destroyed 200,000 public sector jobs. The unemployment rate is currently 30 percent.

Public Enterprises Minister Jeff Radebe insists that the restructuring of state assets—including their partial privatisation—will go ahead as planned. He accused Cosatu of hypocrisy, pointing out that all the government partners, including Cosatu, had agreed the programme in advance.

The government anticipates it will earn 18 billion rand (\$2.15 billion) from privatisation in 2001/2002. The plans include the selling off of 20 percent of the largely state-owned Telkom telecommunications utility, the partial privatisation of the Eskom power utility and parts of the Transnet transport corporation.

South African unions suspend auto strike

The strike of 21,000 auto workers, which has crippled the South African car industry for the past three weeks,

has been called off by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), despite the fact that no agreement has been signed. The strike hit production at BMW, DaimlerChrysler, Delta (part owned by General Motors), Ford, Nissan, Toyota and Volkswagen.

The National Association of Automobile Manufacturers of SA (Naamsa) has offered a “three year accord”, with an increase of nine percent to be followed by one percent increases in 2002 and 2003. The offer depends on the acceptance of a “no-further claims” clause, which would ban strike action at plant level.

The original demand for a 12 percent increase was reduced by the union to 10 percent during negotiations. Also the union was calling for a two-year rather than a three-year settlement. Union officials have declared the strike a success, despite the fact that neither of these demands has been met. For the past week the union bureaucracy has been manoeuvring for a return to work. Last Sunday the strike was suspended “until further notice”. Numsa secretary general Silumko Nondwangu told a press conference that “substantive progress has been made in reaching an agreement”.

Last Tuesday, DaimlerChrysler threatened to transfer production out of South Africa if the strike was not settled. According to the International Metalworkers’ Federation the average hourly rate for a South African auto worker in 1998 was 20 percent of the rate paid to a Canadian auto worker, 33 percent of the German rate and 18 percent of the rate paid in Japan.

South African tyre workers on strike

5,000 workers have gone on strike at six tyre factories in support of a demand for increased wages. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) is demanding 10 percent, and MWU-Solidarity, the other union involved in the dispute, is demanding 8.5 percent. The New Tyre Manufacturing Employers Association (NTMEA) is offering 7 percent.

Numsa spokesman Dumisa Ntuli said, “We have taken every measure to try to prevent a strike, but the employer has pushed us into a corner.” Businesses involved are Dunlop’s Durban and Ladysmith facilities, Continental’s Port Elizabeth factory, Goodyear’s Uitenhage plant and Firestone’s sites at Brits and Port Elizabeth.



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