

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

8 November 2001

French port staff stage 24-hour strike

On November 6, French port workers held a 24-hour work stoppage. The strike halted all ferry services between the ports of Calais and Dover in the UK. The strike began at 1400GMT and involved members of the CGT trade union as part of a campaign organised by the International Dock Workers Council (IDC). The IDC is opposing European Union proposals to deregulate cargo handling and allow non-union labour to be employed on the docks.

The strike hit all three of the companies that use the Calais to Dover route—P&O Stena Line, Hoverspeed and Sea France. Hundreds of passengers were transferred to travel on the Eurotunnel service instead and freight crossings were diverted to the port of Zeebrugge. Sea France, which runs 15 return crossings a day between Dover and Calais, offered full ticket refunds to passengers hit by the strike.

UK Social security staff to ballot for national strike action

Staff at the UK's social benefit offices are to vote on national strike action over the removal of security screens in new job centres. The Public and Commercial Services union is to ballot its 50,000 members, claiming that the screens removals will jeopardise the safety of Jobcentre staff.

In the last week a number of selected benefit offices in the UK have been involved in an initial strike against the proposals. National strike action is anticipated from December if a ballot of PCS membership goes in favour. Any action would then coincide with government plans to introduce new benefit offices called Jobcentre Plus, which are part of the merger of the employment service and benefit agency.

During the initial strikes it was revealed that the government was sponsoring plans by social security managers to grant strikebreakers bonuses and other perks to undermine the strike action. Strikebreakers who had agreed to travel to London to work in strike hit offices last week were initially put up in the £123-a-night Russell Hotel in Russell Square. They have now been moved to the £71 a night Swallow Hotel in Kensington.

Last year there was a large increase in recorded incidents of staff being verbally and physically abused in benefit offices and job centres. These included more than 140 instances of physical attacks on staff. Workers fear that removing the protective screens will increase the likelihood of violence against them.

The PCS has called for talks with Jobcentre management and told the prime minister that it does not want to escalate the dispute into national strike action. PCS general secretary elect Mark Serwotka said "We want to get back round the negotiating table

but in the meantime we're balloting our members on strike action so that we can convince management how seriously the issue is taken."

North Sea helicopter pilots vote for strike action

North Sea helicopter pilots have voted in favour of strike action in a dispute over pay. The pilots are in dispute with CHC Scotia and on November 1 voted 78 percent in favour of strike action.

The pilots are demanding that their pay be increased so that it is in parity with fixed-wing pilots. The pilots are based in Aberdeen, Norwich, Humberside and Blackpool and serve platforms owned by some of the UK's largest offshore oil operators, including BP, ExxonMobil, Talisman, TotalFinaElf and Kerr-McGee.

The pilots are members of the British Airline Pilots' Association (Balpa) who organised the ballot. Balpa can now legally organise a strike within seven days of the ballot result and has stated that action could be held in the next seven days.

Senior lecturers at Israel's universities begin indefinite strike

Senior lecturers at Israeli universities announced the start of an indefinite strike on November 5, after rejecting a Finance Ministry request for a four-day postponement to allow the two sides to enter negotiations on a wage agreement.

The lecturers are demanding a 16 percent wage increase, which would bring their salaries in line with other senior workers such as Knesset (parliament) members and judges. Finance Ministry officials have rejected the claims, saying they are unjustified and would put an impossible strain on the state budget.

The chairman of the co-ordinating committee of the organisations of senior faculty, Professor Assa Lifshitz of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, said that they were, "given the impression that real negotiations could not be held with the treasury unless there was a strike. Once the universities are on strike, negotiations can be held every day until our demands are met." The strike had previously been postponed for two weeks, but now most lectures for first, second and third degree students will be cancelled.

The head of the junior faculty members' organisations, Yaron Yehoshua, said that even though the junior staff are not striking, teaching assistants will not break the strike, and the universities will not be able to ask them to fill-in for the senior staff.

Senior members of the faculty co-ordinating committee told the trades union body, Ha'aretz, that should the strike continue for three weeks to one month, the lecturers will limit damage to the students by either making up the material during the semester

break or extending the academic year.

The head of the student union announced that if the strike lasts longer than one week, the student union would begin a “defensive strike” that will shut Israel’s universities to all workers.

Industrial action continues in key Israeli sectors

Strikes in three major departments throughout Israel looked set to continue as of Wednesday November 7.

The strike at the National Insurance Institute (NII) entered its second day on Tuesday, and no meeting has yet been set between the employee’s union and the institute’s management.

Workers in the central branch of the NII in Jerusalem turned off their main computer Monday. With the NII’s central branch shut, payments to the unemployed, the elderly and victims of terror attacks will be frozen.

Labor and Social Affairs Minister Shlomo Benizri met Monday with the ministry’s employee representatives, but failed to end the three-week long dispute. The Ministry employees are demanding additional staff at homes for the mentally handicapped.

Talks were also held Monday night with Customs employees, in an attempt to end a 10-day long work stoppage. The workers have slowed the inspection of baggage at the arrival hall at Ben Gurion Airport, which has resulted in crowding in the terminal. The customs agents have also stopped the release of export and import cargo from air and seaports.

Israeli Land Registry dispute unresolved

Workers at the Land Registry Bureau yesterday rejected the call by Meir Sheerit, the Justice Minister, for an end to their industrial action. As a result, employees will continue to refuse to receive the public, answer calls or handle mail. The employees are protesting a tender issued by the Justice Ministry for the outsourcing of some of the duties currently performed by the Land Registry.

Sheerit met yesterday with employee representatives and Yuval Rachlevsky, the Finance Ministry’s wages chief, and called on the employees to end their strike. He tried to allay their fears of computerisation of the service, explaining that it was intended to bring the service into the 21st century and would also make things easier for the employees themselves. But workers fear that their rights and benefits would be badly affected.

Nigerian local government workers strike spreads

The strike by Nigerian local government workers is continuing, and has been joined by the local government councils in Lagos State. The nationwide strike by employees of local government councils started Monday last week, when a 42-day ultimatum given by the workers expired.

The workers are protesting non-payment of their salaries by the councils. Some of the councils owe their workers between three and 21 months in unpaid salary arrears, though most council chairmen attributed the problem to the “zero revenue allocation policy” that has been imposed by the federal government. This policy means that national and state primary education boards employ teachers without first consulting the local government councils involved, then the salaries of those teachers are deducted from councils’ statutory allocations.

The local government workers in Ekiti State are on strike as part of national action by the National Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE). The President of NULGE in Ekiti State,

Segun Onaode, said that the Federal Government owed local government pensioners in the state about N1 billion due to its failure to transfer the five percent deduction from the annual salary of local government staff to pay pensions.

Just four of the 16 local governments in the state have been able to pay workers regularly while most of them are owing up to six months salary arrears.

2,500 Nissan workers on work stoppage

Almost 2,500 workers at the Nissan motor manufacturer in Pretoria, South Africa are currently on strike over the company’s implementation of “voluntary separation packages” without prior consultation with the union. The company gave notice on Friday last week that they will continue giving the packages to workers willing to accept them, at the same time that talks were taking place with the union on the retrenchment of 468 workers.

Although prepared to launch a strike to defend its place at the bargaining table, Numsa has not been willing to do so in defence of jobs. The union admitted in a press release that it had “made drastic and substantial proposals on retrenchments and voluntary separation packages”, to which the company had failed to respond. The union has been negotiating with the company in the past four months over the retrenchments of 982 workers. This is in addition to the 3,000 workers that Nissan has retrenched in the last three years and the 500 jobs outsourced to other companies. Nissan says it is under serious competitive pressure and blamed the South African government’s Motor Industry Development Programme (MIDP).

8,000 steelworkers strike in South Africa

Close to 8,000 workers at Columbus Stainless Steel and four subsidiary companies at Middelburg have joined a sympathy strike against BHP Billiton, in support of a four-week long strike at Ferrochrome producers Samancor. Meanwhile, sympathy strikes continue amongst the 6,000 Witbank workers at Highveld Steel and five subsidiary companies. The company has locked out all the strikers from the Highveld Steel plant. The Samancor strike is demanding a 15 percent wage demand against the company’s offer of 5.5 percent.



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