

Workers Struggles: Europe

4 January 2002

Bank workers in France strike for better pay and conditions

French bank workers began a 24-hour strike on January 2, in a campaign designed to pressure employers into talks over salaries, staff hirings and job security. The strike was timed to coincide with the launch of the euro, which began circulating in 12 European Union states on January 1.

Some five unions had called the one-day strike, although last week BNP Paribas, France's biggest bank stated that it had reached an agreement with two of the unions regarding pay deals for 2002.

The French Finance Minister Laurent Fabius condemned the strike and stated, "The euro must not be taken hostage. I think a spirit of responsibility will win out in the end."

French doctors' strike continues over fees

Public health sector doctors continued their nation-wide strike last week, in their ongoing campaign to demand an increase in fees that are charged to patients. The action had reached its fifth day by January 31 and resulted in the closure of many medical centres.

They are demanding a 14-percent increase in the office fees the government allows public sector doctors to charge. The doctors are also calling for a 46-percent increase in home visit fees.

Public sector doctors, whose consultation fees are reimbursed under state health care arrangements, currently charge up to 115 francs (£10.70) for an office visit and 135 francs (£12.55) for a home visit. Private doctors' fees can be more than triple these amounts.

The doctors said last week that talks with the government have failed to result in a satisfactory agreement. Two doctors' unions met with representatives of Labour Minister Elisabeth Guigou. One of the demands of the unions is for talks with Guigou herself, which the minister has so far rejected.

The strike has seen a large increase in the number of people using Accident and Emergency facilities at hospitals. Many were reporting ailments such as

bronchitis and other common illnesses that would normally be treated in medical centres and offices.

The unions initially stated that the doctors would return to work after a few days of industrial action. However on January 31, Claude Maffioli, president of the CSMF union said, "The movement will continue. We're looking into how we can expand the movement."

Doctors refuse to perform ultrasound scans after French court ruling

French gynaecologists are refusing to carry out ultrasound scans on pregnant women following a groundbreaking court ruling, widely described as establishing a child's right "not to be born".

A child suffering from Down's syndrome, a genetic disorder, successfully sued doctors because an ultrasound scan had failed to detect the condition, and hence an abortion was not considered. The same principle was upheld in a further three cases involving babies with other birth defects.

Doctors and disabled campaigners have described the ruling as an "incitement to eugenics". Though they will continue to carry out scans on patients already under their care, doctors will refuse to carry out ultrasound scans on any newly pregnant women.

In addition to ethical objections, doctors insist that an ultrasound scan is far from being 100 percent certain to find any potential disabilities in the foetus. In relation to Down's syndrome, it relies on spotting differences in the skin thickness on the neck of the developing foetus. There are other tests available to doctors, but only the most invasive of these have a high detection rate, and thus carry a higher risk of producing a miscarriage.

Bank of Italy hit by strike action

Workers at the Bank of Italy struck Wednesday January 2, in an attempt to force mediation of their contract dispute. The action was timed to take advantage of the increased workload as a result of demands for the new euro notes, but both unions and management said the impact of the strike remained unknown.

Mixed reports of air traffic control dispute in

Hungary

Hungacontrol, Hungary's air traffic control company, claims services remained normal at Budapest's Feihegy Airport January 2, despite continuing strike action.

Management said that all workers had been on the job since the previous afternoon and that services were being maintained as normal. But union representatives claimed that no strike action had been called for either the afternoon or evening shifts, and denied reports that the strike was a failure, stating that action would continue.

Bank workers protest in Scotland against opening during public holiday

Employees of the Royal Bank of Scotland held a demonstration outside its Glasgow headquarters on January 2, to protest the bank's decision to open that day. January 2 is a public holiday in Scotland.

The Royal Bank of Scotland claimed that only those who had requested to work were staffing its branches. The Unifi bank employees union denied this and said they had evidence that some workers had been instructed to work, or face possible disciplinary action.

Union spokesman Rob MacGregor said January 2 is "recognised by just about everybody as a public holiday." He said the bank had "anglicised" public holidays in Scotland. "We never used to have Easter Monday as a holiday and the [public] holiday in August has been moved to the end of the month, which is no use to most Scottish families as their children are back at school. The bank has said it is prepared to recognise the legitimacy of a public holiday in Ireland on July 12, so if it's good enough for the Irish, what's wrong with respecting Scottish holidays?"

The union also stated that Royal Bank of Scotland had refused to compensate staff who worked on January 2 with days off in lieu, bonuses or overtime pay.

The strike was described as a "damp squib" by bank management, who claimed that a total of 105 branches, or a third of their Scottish total were open.

Injunction halts Eurostar strike

Strikes planned by Eurostar workers were called off January 2, after the cross-Channel train operator gained an injunction to prevent the action over pay.

The injunction was sought after train managers staged a strike prior to the Christmas holidays, forcing Eurostar to cancel 14 services. A company spokesman refused to give details of the legal basis for the court's decision, saying they were happy that services would not be disrupted.

Rail workers in Britain launch four-day strike action

Strike action by rail workers employed by South West

Trains (SWT) halted services on the busy Poole to Waterloo line on January 2 and 3. The action is set to be repeated next week, since union representatives rejected a pay deal said to be worth 15 percent over three years.

The Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and SWT management were locked in talks Wednesday but unable to prevent the action. The union claimed its members were being treated as second-class citizens.

Belfast bus drivers' wildcat strike continues

A lightning strike by Belfast bus drivers is continuing, after workers rejected management proposals aimed at ending the two-day dispute.

The workers walked out without warning on January 2, in protest at increasing violence against drivers, which in recent weeks has led to the withdrawal of services from parts of Belfast. Unions representing the drivers said that not enough had been done to protect the Citybus workforce from attack.

The unofficial stoppage caused chaos in Belfast city centre, with hundreds of shoppers left stranded as they attempted to get to and from the traditional January sales.

Translink said the strike had now spread to some Ulsterbus services on the Falls Road in West Belfast and the Lisburn Road in South Belfast. In an effort to combat the attacks, Translink has introduced a number of security measures, including shatter-resistant windscreens and CCTV cameras.

While the company provides some counselling services for drivers who have been subjected to a violent attack, staff feel that not enough is being done. John Coffey, of the Transport and General Workers' Union, said: "There are certain incidents in which drivers feel they were let down by the company due to a lack of compassion."



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