Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

17 January 2002

JobCentre staff strike over safety

Workers at a new-style JobCentre have walked out on strike in a dispute over safety. The £3 million JobCentre Plus office, which aims to deliver benefits advice and a range of information to job-hunters, opened last week in Birmingham.

But members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCSU) have gone on strike, claiming their safety fears are being ignored. The union held a nationwide walkout last year after complaining that the lack of security screens in the new offices, which are being opened across Britain, made staff vulnerable to attack.

The government says security guards will be on duty on all floors, and closed circuit television cameras will also be installed.

PCSU local official, Denis Fitzpatrick, said; "We fear that the safety measures in place in the new office put staff at risk of violent attacks, and we want the limited use of protective screens."

Postal union calls pay ballot

Postal workers are being balloted for industrial action in a dispute over pay.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) is seeking a 5 percent pay increase and a minimum basic wage of £300 a week by October 2003 for its 150,000 members.

Two thirds of CWU members work a six-day week, starting at 5.30am. The 2 percent increase offered by management is a pittance, compared to the massive salaries and bonuses paid to the top directors in the industry.

Tyre workers left with uncertain future

Workers producing Goodyear tyres at the Stafford Road plant, Wolverhampton, are considering strike action if management confirm the proposed 460 jobs losses at the factory.

Last November, the tyre manufacturer blamed "severe over-capacity" in the industry for casting a shadow over its main UK plant. It is feared that the job losses would make the factory unviable, leading to its closure, with the loss of almost 1,800 jobs.

Senior Goodyear vice president Vernon Dunckel is to meet with Transport and General Workers Union (T&G) representatives to discuss the job losses.

The Stafford Road plant has been producing car, truck and agricultural tyres since the late 1920s. In January 2000, the workforce agreed to a deal accepting a pay cut and longer hours in return for management not implementing 300 job cuts.

Strike threat over school attacks in Belfast

Teachers in north Belfast may take strike action in protest over sectarian violence outside schools in the area.

The announcement came just 24 hours after loyalist mobs forced the closure of a Catholic primary school, amid fears for the safety of the pupils. Several other schools in the north of the city were also forced to close early over concerns about further trouble.

Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) leader Frank Bunting said he had asked the department of education to sanction strike action over what he described as an "intolerable situation."

"The serious disruption to the pupils' education and above all the trauma being revisited on young children is worse than a scandal," Bunting said.

Turkish journalists protest against media job cuts

A protest march by journalists through Istanbul against the Turkeys' present media crisis received wide support in Europe and the world.

The International Federation of Journalists and its regional organisation, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), gave its full support to the IFJ-affiliated *Türkiye Gazeteciler Sendikasi* (Turkish Journalists Union), who organised the demonstration in co-operation with other professional organizations.

Turkey has seen the mass sacking of journalists and other media workers, as well as the regular flouting of labour laws in the media.

January 10 was the 40th anniversary of the enactment of Turkey's labour law, which also provides the framework for the working conditions of Turkish journalists. As all media owners consistently ignore this legislation, the demonstrators were demanding the Turkish authorities enforce the law.

Israeli labour federation holds sympathy strike with the disabled

The Histadrut labour federation held a two-hour general strike on January 15, in sympathy with the disabled, who have been camping outside the government complex in Jerusalem for the past 28 days, demanding increased state assistance.

Histadrut head Amir Peretz announced Saturday that since the government had been unable to resolve the crisis for almost a month, he would ask every Israeli worker to donate one vacation day, which would be cashed in and paid into a special fund for the disabled.

The protesters are demanding the basic disabled stipend paid to all 144,000 eligible persons—1,741 Israeli New Shekels ($385)—be raised to the level of the minimum wage 3,266 shekels ($722).

Last Sunday, Avraham Levy, a mentally disabled protester climbed onto the roof of the Labor and Social Affairs ministry and

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threatened to kill himself. After three hours, police and other protesters convinced him to come down.

Threat of Israeli civil service strike

The Histadrut labour federation has threatened to call a strike in all government offices on either Sunday or Monday next week, in response to civil service Commissioner Shmuel Hollander's decision to freeze staff recruitment in all government offices.

Among other grievances cited are the Commissioner's decisions not to grant grade promotions to 4 percent of civil service employees and not to allow 1 percent of civil service employees to receive a personal promotion, despite having reached the top grade, both of which are standard practice every year.

General Strike grips Nigeria

Nigeria has been gripped by an indefinite general strike since January 16, against the government's recent 18 percent increase in the price of fuel. The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) called the strike after last minute negotiations with the government broke down. On Monday, NLC General Secretary John Odah stated, "Today we have met with various mass organisations that have given their support for the strike... We have inaugurated a mobilisation committee with members drawn from many organisations to ensure successful strike action."

The strike is widely supported, especially by low paid workers for whom the fuel increase will mean a significant attack on their living standards. No public transport is running and it is expected that all banks, markets and filling stations will be closed. The Academic Staff Union of Universities has directed all its members to support the strike action.

The chairman of the Petroleum Products Pricing Regulatory Committee announced the price hike on January 1. An ultimatum was issued just over a week ago by the NLC demanding that the old prices of petrol, kerosene and diesel be restored. The government insisted that it was not prepared to be involved in the domestic fuel price arrangement. An official said, "Government's position at the meetings was that it well not revert to the old pump prices, but that what it will do is to increase the quantity of fuel in circulation to check scarcity."

Meanwhile, the government has declared the strike illegal, claiming that the NLC has not given the required 21 days' advanced written notice of the action. The NLC has rejected the charge and declared that the strike will continue until the government backs down and cancels the fuel price increase.

In preparation for the strike, the government has taken steps to tighten security throughout the country. A meeting was held of the national police chief, the vice president and the governors of most of Nigeria's 36 states. Federal government secretary Ufot Ekaette has warned that the security forces have been ordered to deal "appropriately" with lawbreakers.

In 2000, a general strike forced the government to back down over fuel price increases.

Sierra Leonean teachers on strike over salary arrears

Teachers in Sierra Leone are out on strike, in protest against a series of failures by the government to address their longstanding grievances concerning pay and conditions.

Reasons for the strike, called by the Sierra Leone Teachers Union (SLTU) include:

* Non-payment of teachers salaries and annual increments
* The failure to supply teaching and learning materials to schools
* Non-payment of fee subsidies to primary schools since the second term in 2000/2001
* The slow pace of both recruitment and payment of new teachers

Despite rumours that the strike was to end this week, the action is continuing. A statement made by the union on January 7 called for a sit down strike by teachers, adding that none of the above issues have yet been properly addressed.

Children being used to break South African strike

Workers, on strike for higher wages at Faure Wine Farm near Cape Town, South Africa, have accused the farm managers of using contract staff, including children, to break their strike. The scab labour is being brought in from Khayelitsha and Wesbank. In a memorandum sent to Western Cape Premier Peter Marais, the strikers have also complained that living conditions are unacceptable and that union members had been victimised.

Maggie Adams, general secretary of the Security Personnel and Allied Workers Union (SPAWU), said that the workers were striking for a living wage and to be treated with respect. "Some workers have been here for more than 40 years and earn just 220 rand ($19) a week without any benefits."

Last week, management called in the police, who attacked the strikers with batons and sprayed them with teargas. Felicity April (41), who has been working on the farm for 11 years, said she was punched in the stomach and hit across the head. She was examined by a district surgeon and has filed an assault charge against the police in Somerset West.

The police claim that a striker had thrown bricks and stones at police, and have filed charges of public violence. SPAWU chairman Ronnie Stallenberg and another union organiser have been arrested on charges of intimidation and trespassing.

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