

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

24 January 2002

French medical staff begin week of strike action

On January 22, over 15,000 nurses marched in Paris as French health workers began a weeklong series of strikes and protests to demand better pay and more funding and staff for public hospitals. The previous day, a walkout by ancillary staff closed all but emergency wards. The action has been called by four of the five main health unions.

Doctors' union Unof spokesman Michel Chassang told the press, "There is a real feeling of despair across the sector. We don't necessarily want more pay, but we do need more money to allow us to provide the standard of healthcare the French people have a right to expect."

Over three-quarters of family doctors and over half of specialists pledged to support the action on January 23, called the "day without doctors" in the press.

One of their main issues provoking the dispute is the shortage of ancillary staff resulting from the introduction of the 35-hour working week in France last year; with unions calling for the creation of 80,000 new jobs in the health service.

Doctors have already held a weekend of industrial action, demanding between a 15 and 20 percent rise in patient consultation and call out fees, which have not increased for several years. The current average income for doctors in the public health sector is just 51,000 euros (\$45,000) per year.

The strikes are the latest in a series of protests over the last few months by staff in the public health service including doctors, midwives and hospital interns. Recent public opinion polls have revealed widespread support for the health service workers.

Strike wave hits Italian airports

Airports across Italy came to a halt on January 18, as a strike over government inaction in the face of the world aviation slump stranded thousands of passengers.

Workers from Alitalia, which is 53 percent state-owned, supported the strike, but employees from a number of private airlines—including pilots, ground staff and flight attendants as well as airport employees are also taking part.

Up to 500 flights were cancelled across the country, with thick fog at Milan's normally busy Linate airport adding to the chaos.

The strike is the fourth in three months to hit the air transport sector, and is almost certainly not the last. Workers are angry

about what they see as government inertia in the face of the aviation meltdown triggered by the September 11 terror attacks in the US.

Last week, Alitalia approved a move to sack 2,500 staff, some 15 percent of the workforce.

But the airline strikes are also part of a broader protest by workers at government plans to make it easier for employers to sack their staff. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has said he must press ahead with further labour "flexibility", because the European Union is demanding it.

More stoppages, this time by air traffic controllers, are planned for January 29 in Milan, northern Italy's main business hub. Italy's three main unions have also called for strikes in all parts of the transport sector for the following day.

Airport works in Manchester, England vote to strike against job losses

Workers at Manchester Airport in Lancashire have voted to strike in dispute over job losses. The workers, members of the Transport and General Workers' Union, voted to strike by a margin of 726 votes to 153. The dates for the strike action are to be announced in the next few days by the TGWU.

The vote was announced on January 22 and was in response to the airports decision to cut 140 security jobs from the current staff of 700. Manchester Airport has stated that it needs to cut security costs as they are "too high compared with other airports for us to be attractive to new airlines."

The TGWU has warned against cutting the jobs, particularly in light of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington in September.

Train guards in northern England to strike for 48 hours

Train guards employed by the rail company Arriva Trains Northern are to begin a 48-hour stoppage on Thursday. The guards, members of Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union are seeking pay parity with train drivers. Talks aimed at preventing the stoppage broke down on Wednesday. Arriva Trains Northern said that the action could result in nearly all its 1,600 daily services being cancelled.

The dispute is one of a series developing on Britain's rail network. RMT members on South West Trains are also planning further strike action, whilst drivers on London Underground, the capital's subway network, are to be balloted in the next few weeks over a series of 48-hour strikes over pay.

Teachers in Iran stage protest to demand more pay

More than 10,000 schoolteachers in the capital, Tehran, held a demonstration outside the national parliament building on January 22 to demand salary increases. A sizeable body of students supported the demonstration, as teachers threatened to hold a national strike to further their demands. The protest lasted some four hours, with police standing close by for the duration. Police also visited a number of schools in the capital in an attempt to identify those teachers who had attended the protest.

The demonstration resulted in all the streets leading to the parliament building being closed to traffic. During the protest, teachers shouted slogans such as “A teacher’s annual salary equals a minister’s monthly salary!” and “Words of advice for us, welfare and comfort for the authorities!”

As the protest continued three parliamentary deputies attempted to discuss the teachers’ concerns. However the protesters refused the invitation and demanded to meet the speaker (chairman) of the parliament regarding their grievances.

Teachers’ pay in Iran is very low and many teachers have to take two or more jobs in order to make a living. The starting monthly salary of a teacher is just 500,000 rials (\$284) while the average pay of an experienced teacher rises to only about 800,000 rials (\$456).

Nigerian newspaper workers go on strike

The workers at the *New Nigerian* newspaper printing plant, based in Kaduna, began an indefinite strike on Friday January 18 to demand the implementation of a minimum wage agreement. A new salary structure was approved by the federal government three years ago, but ever since the workers have been receiving less than the official minimum wage.

Speaking at a press conference, the national president of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Smart Adeyemi, said that the union had exhausted all other ways to overcome the problem with the management at *New Nigerian* newspapers. The NUJ first served notice of its intention to strike last August, unless wages were raised in line with the agreement.

Apart from the *New Nigerian*, the company also publishes *New Nigerian on Sunday* and a weekly newspaper in the Hausa language called *Gaskiya*.

Nigerian oil workers protest against casualisation

On January 2, 18 oil workers carried out a protest against the use of casual labour by Dresser Rand, Nigeria Ltd—an oil services company which employs over 700 Nigerian casuals. The action was organised by the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) outside the premises of Dresser Rand’s landlords, Barroids Nigeria Ltd.

Tanker drivers were mobilised from the Warri zone—from Delta, Edo, Ondo, Kogi and Kwara—to drive 20 trucks to block the entrance to the premises, causing Dresser Rand and the four other oil servicing companies to shut down. Those taking part also denounced the company for sacking 24 casual workers

who were NUPENG members. The angry workers carried placards reading: “NUPENG say no to casualisation and victimisation,” “Enough is enough, Dresser Rand, let our people go back to work,” and “Pack and go and leave us alone”.

According to *THISDAY*, the protesters are considering resorting to civil disobedience and to mobilising oil workers in Delta, Edo, Ondo, Kogi and Kwara to halt operations until their demands are granted.

Zambian government employees angry at loss of entitlements

Workers at the Ministry of Agriculture in Solwezi stormed the office of Kenneth Ntambo, provincial officer of the National Agriculture Information Services (NAIS) on Thursday January 17. They were protesting against the non-payment of their entitlements, including long-service bonuses, leave and travel benefits, and terminal benefits dating back as far as 1994.

Feelings were running so high that the workers threatened to slaughter all animals at Mutanda Research Station and Jiwundu Settlement in a bid to disrupt the livestock breeding and development programme meant to increase the cattle population in the North-Western Province.

Interviewed by the *Zambian newspaper The Post*, Ntambo confirmed that the ministry owes the workers close to one billion Zambian kwacha (\$260,000) in unpaid claims, and questioned whether the government would ever pay up, since the amount keeps rising. He said, “The figure which stood at 6.5 million kwacha [\$1,690 per person] at the end of last year has since shot to 16 million kwacha per person [\$4,156] and continues to grow. If the workers can’t get 6.5 million kwacha what possibility is there that they will ever get their money?”



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