

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

28 February 2002

UK teachers set to strike over allowances

Schools in London face a teachers' strike on March 14 in a dispute over cost-of-living allowances. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) is canvassing 41,000 members over London weighting allowances—additional monies paid to teachers in the capital to offset the high cost of living there. Currently the allowance is set to rise by 3.5 percent from April 1, but the union argues that it should be raised by at least one-third, from £3,000 to £4,000, to cope with rising prices.

Doug McAvoy, NUT general secretary, pointed out that larger allowances were crucial if the government is to overcome the teacher shortage in the capital. Teachers "cannot afford the high cost of living, forcing schools to rely more and more on supply staff to fill vacancies," he said.

Ballot papers are to be returned by March 4 and if the decision is in favour of strike action it will be the first walkout over allowances by London teachers since 1972, when Margaret Thatcher was Education Secretary.

ScotRail strike starts this week

ScotRail train drivers are to stage the first of their four one-day strikes this week in a dispute over pay. Members of the ASLEF union in Scotland will be taking strike action on March 1, followed by further stoppages on March 6, 11 and 19. ScotRail has stated that it anticipates none of its daytime services to be running on these dates.

Manchester Airport security staff on 36-hour strike

Security staff at one of Britain's biggest airports stepped up their industrial action in a dispute over proposed job cuts earlier this week.

More than 200 workers at Manchester Airport walked out at the start of a 36-hour strike over plans to cut hundreds of jobs, slash wages, cut holidays and introduce new rosters.

The TGWU members say their dispute is more about the safety of passengers travelling through airports than about changes in working conditions. Strikers shouted "passenger safety" and "sack the board" as they protested. The workers claim they had been given no alternative but to take industrial action after talks with airport bosses broke down.

London Tube drivers call 48-hour strikes

London Underground (LU) train drivers are to stage two 48-hour strikes in a dispute over pay. Members of the ASLEF and RMT unions will walk out from 12 noon on March 5 to March 7. A second 48-hour strike is set from 12 noon on March 26.

Members of the ASLEF union voted by a huge majority in favour of the action—847 to 191. The union says that LU management has broken a promise to close the £1,600 pay gap between drivers on passenger and engineering trains.

Soon after, the RMT union announced that its members had voted by almost 9-1 in favour of industrial action. The unions represent

about 3,000 drivers and next month's strikes are set to cripple the subway service, used by millions every day.

Italy's largest union calls for general strike

Italy's largest trade union has announced that it will call a one-day general strike at the start of April. It is the first time the union has called for a nationwide stoppage in eight years.

The CGIL union announced it would be calling a general strike on April 5, as part of its protest against premier Silvio Berlusconi's package of labour reforms. CGIL's decision followed talks with Berlusconi on February 20. Berlusconi's right-wing government is currently pushing a bill through parliament that aims to suspend parts of Article 18 of Italy's Workers' Statute—the so-called cornerstone of Italian labour law throughout the post-war period—and make it easier for companies to fire employees.

The strike call received little support from the country's two other leading trade unions, the CISL and UIL. Both unions said they supported attempts to try and get the government to drop proposals that would make it easier for companies to fire employees. But the CISL and UIL said they remained committed to negotiations with the government over the issue. The CGIL, CISL and UIL have traditionally been united in their stance on most industrial relations matters since the 1970s.

An unnamed senior government official rubbished CGIL's threat. "The fact that they are calling for the strike to take place six weeks from now suggests the union is still waiting to see how matters develop... If they were really determined to act they would have called the strike for next week."

Irish probation officers strike

Ireland's probation officers started industrial action last week, causing huge disruption to the country's court and parole services.

The 260 probation officers withdrew their co-operation from the Parole Board and were refusing to provide risk assessments of offenders seeking parole. They are also to stop providing out-of-hours advice to drug task forces in a row over the appointment of the next Probation Service Director.

The officers represented by the trade union Impact have demanded that the next departmental head should have a professional probation qualification. But the Department of Justice is arguing that the priority was to find a candidate with suitable administrative skills.

Impact has given the department a one-week deadline in which to promise that the next director would have a social sciences qualification, or the action will be stepped up. Currently officers are refusing to report to parole boards, which need the information when deciding whether to release offenders from prison.

At a meeting over the weekend the union's strike committee rejected a proposal by the department to appoint an existing staff

member as an acting chief for 12 months from June, by when the new director must be in place.

Polish shipyard fires strikers

Poland's largest shipyard announced February 20 that it had fired more than 100 striking workers in an attempt to keep what it called an illegal protest from spreading and disrupting production.

As many as 500 of the 9,000 workers at Gdynia Shipyard Group have walked off their jobs since the beginning of that week in a dispute over wages, a company decision to stop providing free meals and safety issues. The Gdynia Shipyard Group, located in the Baltic city of Gdynia, also owns the famed Gdansk shipyard, birthplace of the Solidarity trade union that opposed Stalinist rule in the 1980s. The company has said that the strike has not affected that yard so far.

Gdynia spokesman, Miroslaw Piotrowski, said the strike was illegal. He said production at the yard was not seriously disrupted, although several thousand workers had been put on leave until the end of the week. About 5,000 were working normally, said Piotrowski.

The Gdynia yard is a modernised descendant of a Stalinist-era enterprise that has managed to make profits in recent years despite a depressed global market for new ships. It also won contracts for specialised vessels from several Western firms, including the US timber giant Weyerhaeuser, which has ordered seven cargo ships.

The shipyard has suffered recently because of an unfavourable zloty-dollar exchange rate. The work force also has become increasingly restive as the company has laid off workers during restructuring. Piotrowski said company directors would hold talks with trade union representatives, but warned that; "the current economic situation doesn't allow the shipyard to raise salaries this year."

Israeli public sector workers to strike

At a meeting in Tel Aviv last week, public sector unions agreed to hold a protest gathering during work hours March 7. The unions also decided that from the following Sunday, the 50,000 public sector employees will impose sanctions at government offices and public corporations such as the National Insurance Institute and the Israel Lands Administration. Employees will not receive the public, answer telephone calls or handle mail.

Some of the services that will be affected are the issuing of passports and identity cards by the Ministry of the Interior, driving tests from the Licensing Office and job placements by the unemployment service.

The secretary-general of the civil servants union, Ofer Eini, said the strikes were in response to government offices moves to fire thousands of workers employed via temporary employment agencies in order to circumvent a new law requiring employers to make temporary staff permanent after a period of nine months. Eini also cited a recent order issued by Civil Service Commissioner Shmuel Hollander prohibiting government offices from recruiting new employees.

Strike in Sierra Leone hospitals set to spread

Doctors at the three state-run hospitals in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, are threatening to join a strike by the hospital's nurses. Involved in the action are the Connaught Hospital, Princess Christian Maternity Hospital (PCMH), the biggest maternity unit in the country, and PCMH children's hospital.

The nurses have been on strike since February 12 over pay and working conditions. The doctors are already on a go-slow, only working half-days—from 8:00 to 14:00 hours. They have threatened to cut their hours even further and go on strike from March 1, if the government does not address their grievances.

The doctors forwarded their demands, for salary increases and reclassification of grades, to the government as long ago as September 1, 2001, and the President of the Nurses Association wrote in December 2000. Despite the assurances given to them at the time, the issues they raised have not been addressed.

Nigerian nurses end strike after nine weeks

Nurses and midwives belonging to the National Association of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives (NANNM) have been instructed by their union to end a nine-week strike and return to work. This is despite the fact that no change has taken place on the issues that led to the strike action—non-payment of salaries, and the harassment and intimidation of NANNM members. The acting General-Secretary of the association, Alhaji Nwugo C.U. Nwugo, issued a communiqué to the strikers, instructing them to resume normal duties immediately.

The union's decision to call off the action followed an emergency meeting with "well-meaning" Nigerians, including the Special Adviser to the President on Women Affairs, Chief Titi Ajanaku, the wife of former vice president, Rebecca Aikhomu, and other members of the elders forum, who argued for the suspension of the strike to create "a level ground" for negotiations to take place.

The union told the strikers "the meeting appraised the pitiable conditions of the health care industry in the country and regretted the complacency and indifference of the honourable minister of health and his ministry." It did not explain why the union expected this to change following the ending of the strike.

Striking Nigerian health workers sacked

All categories of health workers, who are currently on strike in Kebbi State in western Nigeria to demand the payment of accrued enhanced allowances, have been sacked.

The State Commissioner for Information, Alhaji Abdullahi Mohammed Lamba told newsmen that any health worker, including medical doctors, who participated in the on-going action, should consider himself no longer on the payroll of the civil service. He said, "We have ordered the recruitment of new interested workers for the replacement of those on strike.... They are unpatriotic and saboteurs who want to derail our administration."

Nigerian cocoa workers strike

Workers of Cocoa Industries Limited in Nigeria went on strike on February 22 to demand better wages and conditions. The main issue involved is the refusal by management to renew "Appendix C", an internal agreement governing gratuities and other conditions of service, which ought to be renewed every two years and had expired in August 2001. The strikers are also demanding overtime premium for Saturday working.

Many of the strikers were angered when the management bought two new "executive cars" instead of first attending to the needs of the workers.

Pickets blocked the gates leading to the company's premises, preventing customers from entering or leaving. They carried placards with slogans like "No to slavery!" and "Increase workers salaries!"



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