

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

7 March 2002

## French health workers continue protest

French health workers are set to hold a national day of action on March 12 in an ongoing dispute over the number of staff employed in the public health sector, working hours and the implementation of the 35 hour week.

The day of action has been called by the CGT, FO, CFTC and SUD trade unions. Last September four trade unions—the CFDT, CGC, UNSA and SNCH—and the government signed an agreement for the creation of 45,000 new jobs in the health sector. This agreement was ostensibly to allow the working week of existing staff to be cut. These jobs have not been created as yet and there have been a series of strikes, protests and demonstrations by workers in response, including a day of industrial action and demonstrations on January 31.

Over the last few years conditions has drastically worsened in the health service. Many beds have been cut, services abolished and public wards closed. The average stay of a patient is 5.6 days, compared with 10.4 days in Germany. It has been estimated that between 80,000 and 100,000 new jobs need to be created in order for staff to see a significant cut in working hours.

## Air hostesses at Air Lib in France take strike action

On March 5, the CGT and SNPNC trade unions in France called a strike by air hostesses at Air Lib, the second major French airline, against plans by the company to restructure its operations. The staff are fearful that the proposed restructuring could lead to job losses and an erosion in their working conditions. Air Lib was taken over last year by Holco after its declaration of insolvency. During the last six months the company has lost some 152 million euros (US\$133 million).

## Special needs staff in French schools strike

Three teachers' trade unions in France called a strike at special needs schools on March 5 to protest plans to cut working hours. The national education authorities plan to cut hours from 23 to 18. The pupils at the special needs schools have learning difficulties and take a *premier degré* course up to the age of 10.

At the end of January the SNUipp-FSU, SE-UNSA Education and SGEN-CFDT trade unions sent a delegation to the education ministry to hold discussions on the issue but were unable to reach a settlement with the government.

## Teachers in London, England vote to hold one day strike

On March 5, it was announced that teachers in London are to hold a one-day strike to demand an increase in cost of living allowances. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) has called for the cost of living payment made to offset the high rents and costs in inner London to be increased from £3,000 to £4,000. The government has offered an increase of just 3.5 percent, an extra £105 effective from April 1. Some 41,000 teachers could be involved in the strike on March 14 and hundreds of schools in greater London will be forced to close, as well as schools in surrounding counties including Dartford in Kent, Basildon in Essex and Slough in Berkshire.

## Train drivers in Scotland strike to demand pay increase

Train drivers employed by the Scottish rail company ScotRail are to continue their campaign of strike action by holding another 24-hour stoppage on March 7. They are demanding a substantial pay increase as they are among the lowest paid train drivers in the UK. The strike began at midnight on March 6. The workers held a 24-hour strike last week that led to the cancellation of all ScotRail services and another two strikes are planned for later in March.

## **Staff at Manchester airport continue protests against job losses**

Workers at Manchester Airport are to continue their long-running dispute with airport management by holding another strike in protest at planned job cuts. The members of the Transport and General Workers Union, which include cleaners and floor staff, are opposing plans to shed a number of security jobs. The action follows a breakdown in talks between the union and airport management.

### **Israeli employment services strike to continue**

The strike at the Israeli Government Employment Service is to continue. Workers insist they will remain on strike until their demands are met. As a result of the strike, all of the service's offices are closed to the public.

The strike was called over a number of demands, including the right to hire an additional 160 employees, overturn a reduction in overtime, improve working conditions and station security guards in certain offices where workers have faced violent attacks.

A planned strike at all government offices due to start on March 9 has been postponed for at least 24 hours. The move came after Finance Minister Silvan Shalom promised the Civil Servants Union that the cabinet would cancel the recent decision ordering all government ministries to declare a freeze on hiring and promotions. Income tax employees were also due to go on strike that day, but postponed their action following the scheduling of a negotiating session with senior treasury officials.

### **Clothing workers demonstrate in Tel Aviv against job cuts**

Hundreds of workers from the Bagir clothing company demonstrated last week outside the Azrieli Towers offices of holding company Clal Industries. The workers from the Kiryat Gat factory were protesting against the decision to lay off 750 employees and keep the plant operating on a reduced staff until October. Bagir is a subsidiary of Polgat. Around 1,080 workers have been barricaded in the factory for 12 days, at the time of going to press, and are preventing management from entering or goods from leaving the factory. The Bagir worker's committee and the Histadrut labour federation said they were preparing for a prolonged struggle.

### **South African textile workers strike**

Workers at the Durban-based textile firm, David Whiteheads & Sons are on strike against management's decision to impose a wage cut. The 1,000 plus workers are members of the South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (SACTWU). After management had unilaterally slashed both wages and bonuses by 15 percent in December, a ballot held by SACTWU three weeks ago gave a clear 98 percent majority of votes for strike action. South African labour laws impose restrictions on the timing of strike ballots and on when strikes can be called.

### **Doctors join nurses' strike in Sierra Leone**

Government doctors in the Sierra Leone capital of Freetown last week joined a strike by nurses for higher pay and better conditions of service. The nurses' strike had already brought Sierra Leone's health sector to a standstill for almost three weeks. Hospitals are now almost empty, since most of the patients have left to be cared for at home.

The nurses are demanding an increase in pay and rejected a government offer of an extra three dollars a month as an insult. A UN consultancy team is due to make salary recommendations in April, but the nurses had already waited for the end of the civil war to be declared before starting their strike action and now expect their demands to be addressed immediately.



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