

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

14 March 2002

Teachers in Romania hold national pay strike

More than 350,000 teachers staged a national one-day strike in Romania on March 11. The strike was called by the main teaching union federation, the Alliance of Education Unions (AEU), to demand a national minimum wage of £40 a month. Currently a teacher's basic wage is the equivalent of just £24 a month. Teachers are also demanding additional benefits, such as free school meals.

The government has said that it is not feasible to raise teachers' pay any further due to budgetary limits. Its offer of a five percent wage increase was rejected by the AEU. With inflation running at just over 20 percent, it would amount to a pay cut. Many teachers are unable to live on their pay and need to add to their income by taking other jobs, such as giving private tuition to pupils.

French truck drivers organise blockades

Truck drivers in France began a blockade of around 35 to 40 oil refineries and petrol depots on the evening of March 10, in protest against plans to increase their working hours and a pay cut.

The protest was organised by the FO, CGT, CFTC and FNCR trade unions. Most of the blockades were organised in the north of France, in cities such as Le Havre, Rouen and Dunkerque. A depot in Paris was blockaded and there were similar actions in Toulouse and Vitrolles.

On March 11, police broke up a number of the blockades to prevent the dispute spreading. Later the unions called for an end to the action, whilst employers threatened that drivers could lose their licences and consequently their jobs if they continued the blockade.

The transport ministry, led by Jean-Claude Gayssot, is planning to double the waiting and loading time drivers currently work. This would mean that a 43 hour week for 50,000 long-distance drivers, rising to a legal

maximum of 56 hours. For short distance drivers the legal weekly working time would be 39 hours, with a maximum of 48 hours. The extra hours would not be paid according to existing wage rates. The main drivers union, the CFDT, which has backed the government measure, did not support the action.

Doctors and health workers demonstrate in Paris

On March 10, some 30,000 general practitioners and other health sector workers—including dentists, nurses, pharmacists, biologists and ambulance drivers—held a national demonstration in Paris. The doctors are demanding an increase in the basic fee they charge to patients from 17.5 euros (\$15.50) to 20 euros (\$17.70) and for the opening of new negotiations between doctors, health insurance schemes and the government. They also want house call fees to be raised from 21 euros (\$18.60) to 30 euros (\$26.60). Doctors argue that the increases are made necessary by low pay and government under-investment in the health service.

Health service trade unions, UNOF and SML, called the demonstration together with the National Coordinating Committee of health workers. Members of the CGT and FO trade unions also participated. Claude Maffioli, CSMF President, said, "If the health insurance schemes want a war, they can have it" and threatened further action. But government health spokesman Bernard Kouchner said there would be no negotiations over fees and that doctors have "eyes bigger than their bellies". The demonstration follows two days of strike action held by the doctors and health workers in January and February, which closed more than 80 percent of surgeries.

London Docklands rail workers vote to strike

On March 11, the Rail Maritime and Transport union announced that workers employed by the London's Docklands Light Railway had voted for industrial action by a majority of three to one to demand an

increase in pay. Docklands Light Railway staff earn on average 20 percent less than those employed elsewhere on the subway network. The union has already rejected a four percent pay increase offer and has announced that it will finalise strike dates later this week.

Israeli Interior Ministry to strike for second time in a week

Interior Ministry branches throughout Israel, and the ministry's main office in Jerusalem, closed March 13 as part of a two-day strike. It is the second such strike in a week. Applications for new passports, identity cards, birth and death certificates could not be processed. The action is to protest staff shortages at the ministry's East Jerusalem branch and against a decision to cut overtime hours in half.

Strike action is to resume at Employment Service offices around the country. The offices will be closed to the public and telephone requests will not be handled. Among the strikers' demands is a request for an additional 160 employees at branches around the country.

Finance Ministry workers, who have taken strike action over the past 10 days, have also threatened to step up their protests to demand the equitable distribution of pay bonuses.

Nigerian broadcasting workers strike

Workers at the state-owned Imo Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) in southern Nigeria went on indefinite strike on March 8, demanding the payment of three months salary arrears. The strikers are members of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), the Radio and Television Workers Union and the National Association of Geographic and Allied Workers' Union. The unions announced their intention to call strike action several weeks ago, unless the government paid the outstanding amounts. The Imo State Government has said that it is no longer willing to fund "non-viable agencies" and has withheld stage grants from the corporation since November 2001.

Zimbabwean social security workers end strike

A sit-in by social security workers at the National Social Security Authority was called off on March 10 on union instruction. The workers began their action on March 6 in support of their demand for cost of living allowances and performance merits, which management claims it has already paid. A member of the strike committee denied this, saying that

management had failed to honour the 20 to 30 percent cost of living adjustments awarded to them last October. "All we want is what is due to us. We have been trying to raise a dialogue pertaining to this issue with the management board, but this has failed."

Nigerian state employees threaten strike action

Employees of Oyo State, south-western Nigeria, have issued a 14-day notice for strike action over the non-payment of their February salaries. Governor Lam Adesina said it would be unpatriotic for workers to declare a trade dispute because of a delay in one month's salary when workers in some states were being owed between four and six months pay. He said, "Workers should be ready to make sacrifices as our present predicament was caused by the shortfall in the monthly Federation Account allocation given to us". In a letter to the governor, the workers' representative stated that either the state government should normalise the payment of N6,500 (\$55.30) and allowances or face industrial action.



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