Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

18 July 2002

Council workers hold first national strike for more than 20 years in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Over one million public sector council workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland began a 24-hour strike on July 17. The workers are employed by local authorities and the strike is the first national action since 1979.

Council staff are in dispute to demand a pay increase and have rejected a three percent government offer. Trade unions involved in the dispute, including the largest public sector body UNISON and the Transport and General Workers Union, are calling for a six percent increase.

The strike involves workers in many occupations, including teachers, school dinner ladies, caretakers, social workers, classroom assistants, library staff, architects, refuse collectors and surveyors.

Many public sector workers are very low paid, with some earning less than £10,000 a year in full time posts. Over the last decade most staff have faced a higher workload while their pay has effectively been frozen.

During the course of the day, strikers are set to participate in rallies and demonstrations in towns and cities throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

French airport security staff continues work-to-rule

Security staff at the Charles de Gaulle and Orly airports in Paris, France took industrial action on July 14 by organising a work-to-rule. The staff are in dispute with their employers to demand a pay increase and more jobs. The work-to-rule began at Orly Airport on June 27 and the security workers at Charles de Gaulle joined the staff in the action on July 3.

The strike had an impact on the airport, with some flights from the Charles de Gaulle being delayed by as much as 20 minutes. Virtually all flights had to proceed without all necessary luggage being on board. At Orly airport some of the delays lasted up to 30 minutes. By midday around 9,500 bags had been left behind at the airport, as security staff would normally check these before they were allowed on the plane.

Airport authorities also allowed some bags to be placed on board without being checked. Workers involved in the work to rule have been distributing leaflets that state, “You are about to board a flight for which security regulations have not been followed. This could put your life in danger!”

Train drivers in northern England continue strike over pay

On July 13, 680 rail conductors employed by Arriva Trains Northern continued their long running strike over pay with a further 24-hour walkout. The conductors, members of the Rail Maritime and Transport Union, have rejected a pay offer of four percent on the basis that train drivers had been offered an 18 percent increase.

Nigerian civil servants strike for salary arrears

Civil servants in Imo State, southern Nigeria, began indefinite industrial action on July 8, demanding the immediate payment of three months salary arrears and other benefits owed them. A circular distributed to all civil servants by the trade union side of the State Public Services Negotiating Council (SPSNC) read: “If the arrears of salary are not cleared at the close of work on Friday July 5, 2002, all workers should lock up their offices and proceed on an indefinite strike to press home our demand.... No civil or public servant in any of the government owned parastatals of any grade level is expected to be at work while the strike lasts. No government driver is expected to drive any government vehicle while the strike lasts.”

THISDAY reported that workers in the state complied fully with the strike call and that all the offices at both the Orlu and Okigwe state secretariats were closed. A police guard was posted outside the offices. The paper also reported that rumours are

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circulating, “that a crony of the state government was allegedly apprehended by law enforcement agents in the United States for allegedly being in possession of millions of Naira said to belong to the state government.” A spokesman for the Governor of Imo State denied the report.

Deputy Governor Ebere Udeaguthe has pleaded with labour leaders to call off the strike, claiming that the government would pay up as soon as the strike ended.

Zimbabwean doctors ban overtime to protest unpaid allowances

Doctors in Zimbabwean public hospitals stopped working overtime from July 8, in protest against the non-payment of allowances by the Public Service Commission (PSC). The doctors declared the action would continue until the PSC honoured its promise to pay them on-call allowances at the going rate, backdated to January 1 this year.

Dr Howard Mutsando, president of the Hospital Doctors’ Association (HDA), said in a letter to Elizabeth Xaba, the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare’s Permanent Secretary: “This decision was reached because the PSC has decided not to lift the ceiling on call allowances as promised a month ago.... The HDA executive has been directed by its membership to inform you that this action will continue until doctors get their allowance arrears running back to seven months ago and PSC lifts its ’ceiling’ on call allowances.”

The HDA has issued a press statement regretting the adverse effects the action will have on the delivery of health care to the general public. It continues, “Yet in all fairness, the HDA hopes the public will understand that doctors, like anybody else, ought to be paid for the time that they are at work. It is our hope that this matter will be speedily resolved and normalcy returns to the public hospitals.”

Zimbabwean construction workers on national strike

The Zimbabwean construction industry came to a standstill on July 15, when workers all over the country downed tools to press for a 150 percent cost of living increase. Negotiations between the Zimbabwe Construction Workers’ Union (ZCWU) and the Construction Industry Federation of Zimbabwe (CIFOZ) broke down a week ago, when the employers offered only 40 percent.

With a current inflation rate of 122 percent, feelings are running high among the strikers. According to the *Daily News* (Harare), strikers have vowed they will not return to work until they receive an increment that will sustain them. Many workers say the 40 percent offer is provocative and “peanuts”.

Nicholas Mazarura, the ZCWU deputy secretary-general, said: “We started by demanding a 180 percent increment across the board, while the employers made an initial offer of 35 percent... We rejected it because the cost of living is rising nearly every day.”

The industry federation issued a circular, posted at all work premises, advising workers they would receive a 40 percent increase from July 1. A union spokesman said this was illegal, since it did not involve other employer representative bodies such as the Zimbabwe Builders Contractors Association.

Zimbabwean construction workers were awarded a 61 percent increase last year.

South African municipal workers strike continues

The South African Municipal Worker’s Union (SAMWU) has failed to end a three-week strike by municipal workers in support of a claim for an across-the-board pay increase of 10 percent or R300 ($29.65), whichever is larger. The union reduced its demand to 9 percent across the board and cut its minimum wage figure from R2,200 to R2,100 a month, but the employers South African Local Government Association (SALGA), rejected the union’s compromise and would not shift from its 8 percent offer for this year, and inflation-linked increases until 2005.

SAMWU, which previously rejected a three-year wage agreement, also backed down on this score. General Secretary Roger Ronnie said the union’s lowering its demands was a sign of “good faith”. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is also seeking to end the strike and initiated a meeting, after SALGA at first refused to return to negotiations.

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