

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

5 September 2002

London Underground workers vote to strike in pay dispute

On September 3, staff employed on the London Underground subway system voted by a large majority to strike in a dispute over pay. The workers are members of the Rail Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) and are protesting about the imposition of a 3 percent wage increase.

The vote for strike action won a large four-to-one majority but the turnout was low. Of the 8,000 ballot papers sent to RMT members, just over 3,000 were returned with 2,518 votes in favour of industrial action and 647 against. Dates for industrial action are to be decided by the RMT later this month.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow called for a mediated settlement and said that London Underground had rejected this offer. "Mediation settled the last pay dispute and there is no reason why it should not settle this one but LU knows that 3 percent is too low, in fact it is the lowest offer from any train operating company this year," Crow said.

Tube train drivers' are also involved in the same dispute and are currently being balloted by ASLEF, the drivers union.

Ward attendants in Ireland walkout in pay protest

Ward attendants at six hospitals in Ireland took strike action on August 28 and 29 in a dispute over pay. The staff are employed in a variety of basic medical duties, including changing dressings. The strike was called by the SIPTU trade union which said that the Health Service Employers Agency (HSEA) had refused to honour a negotiated 8 percent pay increase.

The action is set to escalate as porters, caterers and other non-nursing staff at six hospitals in Dublin—St Mary's, St Ita's, Bru Chaoimhin, Clonskeagh, St Brendan's and St Colmcille's—also began voting in a strike ballot on August 29.

In another dispute, junior doctors have threatened to take nationwide industrial action over their pay and

contacts. Talks are currently underway at the Labour Relations Commission in Dublin between the Irish Medical Organisation and the HSEA. The two parties have set September 16 as the deadline to reach an agreement.

Kenyan teachers boycott classes

Thousands of Kenyan teachers boycotted classrooms at the commencement of final term on September 2, in protest over the government's refusal to implement a pay agreement reached in 1997. Although schools in Nairobi, Kiambu and some provinces opened as usual, most of the country was affected by the boycott. Schools were unable to provide lessons in many districts as teachers held meetings to discuss the dispute.

According to the *Nation* newspaper nearly 5,000 staff in Kisii, supported by their pupils, held a demonstration through the town. They were also protesting at the death of a colleague, Kiragori Nyangoto, two weeks after police arrested him.

Local branches of the 240,000-strong Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) put pressure on the national leadership by calling on members not to begin work at the start of term, and instead hold demonstrations outside district education offices. They called on KNUT General Secretary Francis Ng'ang'a and the national executive council to end negotiations with the arbitration panel.

On August 29, KNUT gave the government a fortnight to implement the remaining phases of the 1997 salary agreement and distanced itself from the plans for a boycott.

Angry teachers confronted the KNUT General Secretary in his office, accusing him of cancelling a planned strike in June without consulting the membership. Joseph Sang, KNUT secretary for Nandi, attempted to defend Ng'ang'a against allegations by teachers that he was in league with the government, urging them to wait for the expiry of the two weeks

ultimatum before taking action.

Kenyan sugar company workers strike

Over 3,000 sugar plantation workers took strike action on September 2/3 at the Mumias Sugar Company (MSC), Kenya's largest sugar factory. They were demanding the removal of company CEO Dennis Driscoll. The strikers paralysed factory operations by shutting down the diffuser machine used for crushing cane and cutting essential services, including electricity, water and telephones, to managerial estates and other areas.

Driscoll is alleged to have retired 600 workers without paying benefit entitlements as laid down in the company's Early Retirement Scheme. He also reduced the worker's football club budget by 80 percent and, according to the Kenya Sugar Plantation Workers' Union (KUSPW) branch secretary in Mumias, he was preparing to slash workers' monthly salaries by 10 percent as part of the company's cost cutting measures.

The industrial action began when Driscoll reported for duty on September 2, escorted by four armed Administration Police officers. Police claimed the security was necessary to prevent the destruction of company property by workers.

The *East African Standard* reported, "A section of the workers raised the alarm, alerting their colleagues about Driscoll's presence. They grouped and marched to Driscoll's office to evict him. But their efforts were thwarted by the armed security personnel." Workers said they would continue strike action until their grievances were met and Driscoll was removed. A return to work was secured after KUSPW officials secured a management agreement to suspend the cost-cutting measures.

Zimbabwean paramedics take action over pay

Paramedics in Zimbabwe are on strike to demand a pay increase and a standardised grading system. The strike, which had entered its second week by the end of August, has spread to many parts of the country. Pharmacists, physiotherapists, radiographers, dental therapists and laboratory scientists are taking part in the action at Bulawayo, United and Ingutsheni hospitals.

The strike began when the newly appointed Minister of Health and Child Welfare, David Parirenyatwa, refused to respond to a two-day ultimatum for the paramedics' demands to be met. Trust Chivasa, a spokesperson for workers in Harare, told the media,

"We want the ministry to solve our problems as soon as possible. That is why we have resorted to this industrial action."

The action is the second such strike by salaried health workers in recent weeks—doctors in the government hospitals held a three-week strike over their grading system and salary review.

South African brick makers in dispute

Workers at Grahamstown Brickworks in Eastern Cape have been on strike since August 27 in support of demands for a 22 percent wage increase and back pay from April this year. The strikers, who are members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), have also demanded to see the company's financial statements.

Strike organiser Elvis Plaatjies said: "I have no idea how long the strike will continue. The position of the employees will stay the same. All they ask is for a living wage".

The brickworks owner is seeking an interdict in the Port Elizabeth Labour Court against the strikers, despite the fact that the strike is legal under South Africa's strict labour laws.

South African textile workers enter seventh week of action

Workers at Team Puma Textiles have been on strike for seven weeks in support of their demand for an 8.25 percent wage increase, higher annual bonuses, provident fund contributions and shift allowances. They are also protesting against management's attempt to impose a "continuous work cycle".

Management claims that the new schedule is essential for the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) to operate successfully in South Africa. Robert Feinblum, group chairman of Sherco, Team Puma's parent firm, stated: "The main dispute is not about the non-payment of an appropriate wage rate, because we are willing to negotiate a reasonable wage settlement provided the workers accept a continuous work cycle... this practice is followed in all the successful export countries around the world and especially by our competitors."



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