

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

11 October 2002

French public sector workers strike and demonstrate in the capital

On October 3, gas and electricity workers in France held a national strike as thousands of public sector workers demonstrated in Paris to protest plans by the new government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin to part-privatise state utilities. In France the state sector employs nearly five million workers.

Workers employed by the energy firms Electricité de France and Gaz de France were joined by post office staff, Paris public transport service workers, SNCF state rail employees and other workers. According to trade union representatives the strike resulted in a 20 percent cut in electricity production.

The demonstration was the first major protest against the government since it assumed office in June. The demonstration proceeded from the Place de la Nation in eastern Paris to the Place de l'Opera near the centre. Organisers announced that some 80,000 attended.

The French government has said it will continue with the energy company selloffs and Finance Minister Francis Mer confirmed last week that the government plans to sell part of the two utilities by 2004, but to maintain a majority share.

Air France employees, who are currently taking industrial action to oppose part privatisation of the airline, also participated in the protest. The strike by the Air France employees at Paris airports Orly and Charles de Gaulle on the same day involved around 20 percent of the workforce and resulted in the cancellation of about 60 flights, most of these being domestic. The government has sold part of Air France to investors and has plans to reduce its current 54 percent ownership of the airline by about half.

London Underground workers continue strike

London Underground subway workers staged a further strike on October 2 in an ongoing dispute over pay. The workers, member of the Rail Maritime and Transport Union and train drivers union ASLEF, are protesting against the imposition of a three percent pay deal by management.

The strike began at 8pm in the evening and lasted 24 hours. As well as forcing the cancellation of most of the underground services, the strike led to traffic jams and delays on routes in and out of the capital.

London traffic wardens strike

On October 7, traffic wardens in London began a one-week strike in an ongoing pay dispute. They are calling for an increase in the London Weighting allowance to £4,000 a year.

The allowance is paid to council workers in London because of the extra costs associated with living in the capital. The action involved hundreds of wardens in Croydon, Hammersmith, Haringey, Hounslow, Islington, Merton and Tower Hamlets and was called by the public sector workers union, UNISON.

Local authorities will not be able to collect thousands of pounds in revenue because parking tickets will not be issued for its duration.

Later this month the campaign will include industrial action by finance workers, street cleaners and environmental health officers. The current London Weighting allowance ranges from £1,700 to £2,400 a year. The Association of London Government (ALG) has stated that it will not increase the amount paid.

Leicester theatre staff to strike

Engineers, wardrobe staff and box office workers at the Haymarket Theatre in Leicester, England have voted by a margin of 88 percent in favour of holding strike action in a pay dispute. The workers are members of the Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union. The union plans to hold a strike on October 9, 12 and 13 to coincide with performances of the sold-out musical *Hot Stuff*, which now faces cancellation. The union is calling for a 60-pence hourly increase for all staff.

Kenyan teachers dispute could become general strike

The Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU) in Kenya is threatening to call a nationwide strike of all affiliated unions, if the government does not resolve the national teachers' strike that began on September 22. They have given the government 14 days to honour the agreement.

The dispute, which has closed almost all state schools in the country, involves around 240,000 teachers. They are demanding that the final stage of a wage agreement, signed between the union, the employers and the government in 1997, be implemented in full.

The Kenya National Union of Teachers is accusing the Ministry of Education and the Teachers Service Commission of "meddling" instead of coming up with practical solutions to the impasse. President Daniel Arap Moi has ruled out the possibility of the teachers receiving the promised pay rise, insisting that the economy was "gloomy". The government has acted to stop teachers' salaries for September, threatened the striking teachers with the sack and advertised new teaching posts.

Parents are concerned that the stoppage is affecting their children's education. The Kenya National Association of Parents has asked its members and their children to start camping outside government educational offices across the country.

One striking teacher commented, "We are learning that the government is using threats to break us. We also know they want to sack us. We do not wish to abandon our children, but should they continue like this, then we will fight on."

Zimbabwean teachers defy government intimidation

The national sit-in called by the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) from October 8 is going ahead, despite the fact that the government has declared it illegal and threatened to fire those taking part. In an attempt to head off the strike, Education, Sport and Culture Minister Aneas Chigwedere told parliament that teachers' salaries would be significantly increased next January. The claim was dismissed by the PTUZ.

A high school teacher in Zimbabwe takes home about 20,000 Zimbabwe dollars (\$US364) a month, and the government has admitted that this is the lowest wage in the southern African region. Last January, the government awarded members of the uniformed forces a salary increase of 165 percent and health workers 155 percent, while teachers received only 55 percent.

The teachers are demanding a 100 percent salary increase backdated to January this year, plus a 100 percent cost of living adjustment backdated to June, to counter the effects of Zimbabwe's rapidly rising inflation rate. They also want an immediate review of teachers' conditions of service and an end to the victimisation of teachers working in the rural areas, who they claim, have borne the brunt of attacks by Zanu PF supporters.

Leaders of the largest teachers' union, the Zimbabwe Teachers' Association (ZIMTA), have refused to back the action. ZIMTA President Leonard Nkala said the union would wait for the government to complete a job evaluation exercise and see if the 2003 budget would cater for the teachers' needs. Nkala is a Zanu PF councillor in Mpopoma, Bulawayo.

The PTUZ has claimed that 90 percent of the teachers throughout the country are taking part in the sit-in. According to the *Daily News* (Harare), many ZIMTA members have supported their colleagues and refused to teach. It reported that the most affected areas were schools in the urban areas—Gweru, Kwekwe, Shurugwe and Zvishavane. Most teachers in Mutare reported for duty, but did not teach.

The government's response has been to crack down on the PTUZ. On October 8, Charity Chipuriro, a PTUZ secretary in Harare, was held at the Harare Central Police Station for seven hours. On the following day a union spokesman announced that PTUZ President Takavafira Zhou had been arrested and General Secretary Raymond Majongwe "gave himself up to the police after they had been to his house looking for him". A police spokesman confirmed that Majongwe was due to be

charged under the Public Order and Security Act and that Zhou would have to answer the same allegations.

Striking miners shot dead in South Africa

Two striking miners were shot dead and 14 others wounded by private security guards at a gold mine at Boksburg, nine miles southwest of Johannesburg on October 7. The mine is owned by East Rand Proprietary Mines (ERPM) and managed by Durban Roodepoort Deep (DRD). An independent labour contractor, Circle Labour and Accommodation, employs all the 4,000 miners on strike. They have been on strike for higher wages since October 3, when they did not return to work after the two-day general strike organised by the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

ERPM had obtained a court injunction on October 4 to stop striking miners from entering the mine works. DRD used the court order to send in private security guards against the workers.

Moferefere Lekorotsoana, a spokesman for the National Union of Mineworkers, said the men were shot when security guards tried to force strikers out of the mineshaft area. He said that security told the miners to pack their bags and leave the mine immediately.

Workers were then informed that ERPM had terminated the contract of Circle, leaving 4,000 of them unemployed. This was confirmed in a statement from DRD, which announced, "the termination of the contract between ERPM and Circle on Sunday morning as a consequence of Circle's ongoing inability to provide an uninterrupted labour supply to ERPM."

According to Reuters, ERPM produces 135,000 ounces of gold a year and has lost up to 480 ounces of gold a day since the strike started. Some of the miners receive only \$3.35 a day for hazardous work deep underground. One miner said, "We are working like slaves here." He insisted the attack by the security guards was unprovoked. "We didn't do anything wrong. It was peaceful."

Thousands of miners stood outside the mine after the killing. Superintendent Andy Pieke announced that the police have opened a murder investigation. He said, "We have arrested two security guards and we have seized two shotguns and two side arms."

A heavy police guard remained outside the mine as miners waited to hear the results of a meeting between union officials and management.

A joint venture between current managers, DRD, and a black-led firm Khumo Bathong Holdings Limited is currently performing "due diligence" on ERPM with a view to buying it for \$11.5 million.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact