

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

4 October 2002

Tube and council workers strikes hit London

Two separate pay disputes bought thousands of workers out on strike in London on October 2.

A strike on London Underground is the second 24-hour walkout in a week. The subway stoppage by members of the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and the drivers' union ASLEF is in protest at an imposed three percent pay increase.

Thousands of council workers are also staging a 24-hour strike, which will affect services such as refuse collection and school assistants. The council workers' strike is in support of a claim for an increase in the London Weighting allowance. Geoff Martin, London convenor for UNISON, has warned of further strikes unless the dispute is resolved.

Threat of strike at Air France

The two smaller trade unions at Air France called a strike on October 1-4 to protest against privatisation and a wage rise. A strike on October 3 was supported by six other trade union organisations—the CFDT, CFTC, CGT, FO, SNMSAC and Air South.

French education personnel strike

On September 24, surveillants and aides-éducateurs in France held a national day of protest.

Surveillants are university level students who work between 28 and 35 hours weekly in schools, helping college- and lycee-grade pupils in coursework. The aides-éducateurs have a similar role but are employed under private conditions. There are around 25,000 of them at the college and lycee schools. Surveillants were first employed in 1997/98 and have private five-year contracts for 35 hours a week.

The protest was against plans by the Raffarin government to lay off 5,600 surveillants in 2003 and to eventually eliminate aide-éducateurs. These measures were announced in the context of the decentralisation of public education.

According to the unions, some 50 to 70 percent of the employees supported the September 24 strike. A few hundred demonstrated at Marseille, Nancy and in Paris, where Raffarin presented his plans to high-ranked education officials at the Sorbonne University. Five unions, FAEN, FERC-CGT, FSU, SGEN-CFDT and UNSA, have called for a strike on October 17 against the “regressive” education policy.

Irish strikers may be victimised

Irish workers planning to support a national day of protest on October 4 for improved redundancy payments have been warned they could face disciplinary action.

The protest was organised by four of the country's largest trade unions, representing more than 250,000 workers, after a number of companies refused to make redundancy payments recommended by the Labour Court.

The Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) director of industrial relations, Brendan McGinty, warned that anyone “absenting themselves without permission” would have their pay cut and be “liable to disciplinary action in line with company procedures.”

The IBEC also warned that the proposed half-day work stoppage could trigger legal action against the trade unions.

Israeli unions threaten general strike over pay

Israel's trade union federation, Histadrut, delivered a 10-day ultimatum to private sector employers on September 30, to start negotiations for a 2.2 percent increase in the cost-of-living allowance for some 2.2 million wage earners.

Shalom Shani, Histadrut trade union chairman, said that if there were no progress in the next 10 days strikes would begin at “sensitive” workplaces on October 10 and on October 13. This would then escalate into a

general strike.

Oded Tira, head of the Manufacturers Association, condemned the planned strike saying, “holding sanctions or strikes in the midst of an economic crisis and in a pre-war period, is economic suicide.”

Secretary-General Amir Peretz insisted that Histadrut had shown “great responsibility” in light of the economic and security crisis and had been greatly restrained in labour relations. But, “there has been erosion of wages and pensions, and the lowest percentiles in the public are having difficulty surviving.”

Strikes are expected in the local authorities, as well as the Bezeq airport, railways, government ministries, the postal service, banks and ports. Sanitation collection will cease, as will ticketing of illegally parked cars. No administrative services will be handled at the universities, nor will water failures be repaired. Hospitals and fire services will operate as usual.

Namibian fishing company locks out workers

The Marco Fishing Company of Namibia has locked out its workforces after wage negotiations with the Namibian Seamen and Allied Workers’ Union (NASAWU) broke down. Employers locked the gates on September 23 and only allowed those workers prepared to accept their wage offer to enter.

According to the *Namibian* (Windhoek), the company claimed the union had rejected the company’s offer of an 11.5 percent pay rise despite a number of workers indicating their willingness to accept. NASAWU President Hango Paulus insisted that the workers rejected the offer because it boiled down to exploitation. He told the *Namibian* that by claiming that the offer represented an increase of 11.5 percent, the company was playing a “dirty game”. When the figure is broken down it amounts to a very small increase for the lowest paid workers.

He said, “We have negotiated with the company for six years and never called a strike. They are the ones who have locked out the employees in the past. They just want to exploit the workers and enrich themselves.”



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