

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

15 November 2002

Strikes at seven UK airports planned

The Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) said that its members including firefighters, security guards and other workers at seven airports are to strike for six separate days on November 28, December 2, 10, 15 and 23 and January 2. The industrial action is to be held in a dispute over pay between the union and the airport company BAA.

The strikes are to be at the BAA airports of Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted, Southampton, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh. The airports will be closed for the duration of the strike action. The union said that the strike was to be held as the recent pay offer from BAA was not acceptable following the increase in the workloads and responsibilities of its members in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US.

TGWU national officer Tim Lyle said that the union hoped that the strikes could be averted through negotiations. BAA Group service director Tony Wars said that, "In the interests of maintaining the public service our airports provide, we will be pressing for the involvement of Acas to bring this matter to an early conclusion. We will now develop specific contingency plans and will keep national government fully informed."

London lecturers strike

Thousands of lecturers staged a one-day strike Thursday November 14 to protest over cost of living allowances. The action, by the Association of University Teachers (AUT), is in protest at the universities refusal to increase London Weighting—an additional payment made to workers in the capital to offset higher living costs.

Lecturers complain that for university staff London Weighting has been frozen at £2,134 since 1992, university bosses are awarding themselves "fat cat" pay rises. The AUT said that some of its members earn less than £13,000 including bonuses while university vice-chancellors in the capital get an average of £136,000.

German medical workers alliance protest cuts in medical budget

The German Medical Association (BAeK) has called on healthcare workers to demonstrate this week in Berlin to protest at planned health cuts. BAeK president, Dr. Joerg-Dietrich Hoppe, issued a statement on November 7 opposing government proposals to implement a pay freeze for doctors and cap drug spending.

Hoppe also said that reforms being proposed by Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Health and Social Affairs Minister Ulla Schmidt, would lead to thousands of job losses and a deterioration of medical care. He added that German healthcare was in "danger of dying" and that "I have the feeling that we are going to be finished off".

One of the main planks of the scheme is a reduction on drug spending both through price cuts and by the promotion of "parallel imports", under which medicines are imported from cheaper sources in the south of the European Union.

The German public health insurance system covers nearly 90 percent of the population. The scheme had a deficit of 2.8 billion euros (\$US2.82 billion) in 2001 and 2.4 billion euros (\$US2.42 billion) in the first half of this year.

The demonstration is scheduled to at the historic Brandenburg Gate and is being co-organised by the Alliance for Health 2000. The Alliance is an umbrella organisation of 38 healthcare related organisations representing

4.2 million workers, including doctors, nurses and pharmacists.

Employment agency workers in France strike to demand better working conditions

Staff employed by ANPE, the national employment agency, held a one-day national strike on November 12 to demand better working conditions and the recruitment of more staff. The strike was organised by the CGC, FO, CFTC, SUD-ANPE and SNU-ANPE trade unions. Working conditions at the agency are very tense as unemployed people invariably wait for several hours in long queues leading to mistakes and miscalculations being made by staff.

The agents are protesting against two measures in particular. The first of these is the "help to return to employment" (PARE) programme, that was introduced in July 2001 and the "Contract youth into enterprise" for young unqualified unemployed people to bring them into non-contracted jobs.

The ANPE-agents reject both measures as unnecessary change and do not contribute to real employment. The workers have also accused the UNEDIC (National Unemployment Assurance and Unemployment Benefits) of having a policy of dictatorship over the ANPE.

Strike and blockade of explosives factory ends in Toulouse, France

On November 7, the strike action and blockade of the Toulouse factory of the SNPE company ended following a vote by a small majority of the 100 workers taking part in a general meeting.

At the meeting there were a number of skirmishes as some workers accused others of being blackmailed by management.

The chemical factory exploded in September 2001 and the dispute has centred on the fate of the workers who were employed there.

The unions and management have agreed to the introduction of a social plan until December 31, 2005. In the event that the factory is not re-industrialized a premium of 2000 euros for all who lose their jobs is to be paid. Management agreed to this only if the general assembly agreed on November 7 to immediately end the industrial action.

The management of the SNPE now intends to terminate 492 jobs of the 5600 at the whole SNPE enterprise, including 402 of the 557 jobs at Toulouse. The company intends to end explosives production in favour of chemical pharmacy products.

Government information staff in France strike to demand secure contracts

Some 60 of 112 government workers employed by the information service of the French government began a strike on November 7. The strike is being held for one hour each day and is being organised by the CFDT trade union. The strike is the first by workers employed in this governmental department since its creation in 1976.

The role of the workers includes reviews of the press, communication campaigns and the preparation of polls and surveys. About 80 percent of the staff work under conditions of permanent contracts.

The main demand of the strike is for those workers who are on short contracts to have them renewed on December 31. Some of the staff have been employed in the service since 1996 and will have their employment terminated on December 31 without any compensation or premium.

Three other contracts will which end on December 31 will not be renewed for the usual three years, but only for one year. A further 20

employees, whose contracts end in 2003 fear similar difficulties.

French truck drivers set to strike in pay dispute

French truck drivers' employers have rejected a pay increase demand from the two main drivers' unions, the CFDT and CGT. The unions have set a deadline of November 22 for the employers to reconsider their position and to sanction a salary payment for a 13th month every year.

Christian Rose, the national secretary of the freight federation UNOSTRA said that, "We take note of the [unions'] position. But we are not in any position to open negotiations over a 13th month for the whole of the workforce."

The unions have agreed to hold industrial action if there is no response from the employers' organisations. CFDT secretary-general Joel le Coq said that, "We will call for action without delay if there is no answer. If necessary the roadblocks will stay up for four or five weeks."

Nigerian ExxonMobil workers take action for better conditions

Nigerian oil employees at Mobil Producing Nigeria Unlimited, part of the US based ExxonMobil transnational corporation, began a series of warning strikes on November 8. The workers are pushing for improvements in their welfare entitlements, including health and eating conditions as well as an upward review of salaries. They are also demanding the recall of ExxonMobil managing director, Mr Mike Fry due to anti-labour policies.

For more than an hour, oil workers belonging to the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), Mobil Branch, held demonstrations outside the company's Victoria Island Corporate Headquarters chanting anti-management songs. Another demonstration took place simultaneously at the company's operational base, Qua Iboe Terminal (QIT), in Akwa Ibom State.

A PENGASSAN official stated that the warning strike was held after negotiations between the union and management resulted in deadlock. ">From today and until the management addressed our demands, we will continue to hold the demonstration, even for one hour," the official said.

Workers said their wages were 15 percent lower than others in the industry, even though ExxonMobil is the second largest and the lowest cost Nigerian oil producer. "The workers' patience is fast running out as it does not seem management would accede to the request," one employee was quoted as saying.

The union has criticised the company's labour policy for Nigerian workers since the merger between Mobil and Exxon to form ExxonMobil, accusing it of systematic replacement of Nigerian officials with expatriates.

Nigerian railway workers strike over pay arrears

Members of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) in Nigeria went out on an indefinite nationwide strike on Friday November 8, after the expiry of a three-week deadline for the Nigeria Railway Corporation (NRC) management to effect payment of salary arrears.

Workers are owed over nine months salary arrears while pensioners are owed over 21 months of unpaid pension arrears. Managing director of the corporation, Alhaji Abubakar Abdulrahman, claimed that he expected payment to be made of N1.4 billion (\$US11.3 million) for seven months of the salary arrears and N1.8 billion (\$US14.5 million) for pensioner arrears. However, there is no mention in the reports of his statement of any date being given on which payment will take place.

Speaking at the weekend Nigeria Labour Congress General Secretary John Odah attacked Nigeria's ruling elite saying they had "systematically and deliberately destroyed the nation's railway, the only mass transport system in Nigeria."

Kenyan local government workers strike against non-payment

More than 1500 local government workers at the Nakuru Municipal Council, Kenya went on strike on November 5, to protest the failure by the council to pay their salaries for two months. The workers staged a sit-down protest outside the Town Hall. They say salaries for September and

October add up to more than Sh40 million (\$US507,000).

The Kenya Local Government Workers Union (KLGWU) held a meeting with council officials. Town clerk Gabriel Kenaiya and union officials came out of the meeting to inform workers that the council could not pay their salaries immediately, but would pay salaries for the junior staff next week, while other workers would be paid as soon as funds were available. The council official said he had told the local education officers to allow workers' children back to school, after being sent away due to inability to pay school fees.

According to the Kenyan newspaper, the *Nation*, "union officials accused the workers of incompetence in the collection of council revenue" and claimed that this had contributed to the council's difficulties. National deputy secretary general of the KLGWU, Aloise Otiende, warned the workers that they risked losing their jobs unless they called off the strike. He said the council's financial problems resulted from the takeover of some its houses by the National Housing Corporation and the move by the environment and natural resources ministry to take over the management of the council's water and sewerage department.

More Strikes in Zimbabwe

Lecturers at the University of Zimbabwe are refusing to teach because their salaries have failed to keep pace with soaring inflation. Students have been told by the university's vice chancellor that end of year exams will now be postponed until next March. Final year students will be unable to graduate. Many courses at the university are no longer available because lecturers have left the country which has been hit by famine and economic decline and they have not been replaced. Most of the country's elite send their children to universities in South Africa, Britain or the United States because of the declining conditions at home.

Meanwhile, engineers at the national airline, Air Zimbabwe, are in their eighth week of a strike over wages. The company is having to send their planes to South Africa for repairs and servicing. Many engineers have also left the country. Teachers, railway workers, doctors and others in the health sector have also been on strike in recent months.



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