Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

22 November 2002

Portuguese state workers strike

On November 14 state employees in Portugal held their biggest strike for a decade in protest at the government's labour policies and economic programme. More than 500,000 workers were involved in the stoppage affecting all areas of public administration.

During the strike most schools were forced to close, while health services and refuse collection were disrupted across the country. Other public buildings such as government offices and courts also closed.

The strike was called by a number of public sector trade unions representing some 700,000 workers to protest new labour laws under consideration by the conservative government that would erode employment rights. The unions are also calling for a pay increase between five and 5.5 percent next year. The government has offered 3.6 percent and is refusing to negotiate.

The new laws would see the introduction of flexible working hours, an extension of short-term contracts, experimental employment periods, mid-contract changes to job descriptions, as well as making it easier to fire and make workers redundant.

The government has stated that the measures are necessary to improve productivity and increase Portugal's share of foreign investment. Prime Minister Jose Durao Barroso said, "What we're doing has to be done. There's no alternative."

Junior doctors in Italy strike over contract and pension scheme

Junior doctors in Italy held strikes and a demonstration in the capital Rome. The doctors are demanding decent training-employment contracts and pension schemes. An estimated 12,000 doctors participated in the demonstration.

Amsce, the representative association of junior doctors, reported that more than 90 percent of doctors doing their hospital training to become specialists went on strike for a week.

Dr. Francesco Silenzi, Amsce's national vice president, said, "We are determined to go on all-out strike. These are real doctors who work many hours in hospitals and yet are treated as students. They receive a monthly gross scholarship of 960 euros. They do not have maternity or pension rights, and have to pay the professional liability insurance on their own. It is simply unacceptable. We want our professionalism to be recognised. The government must invest in good training programmes as these young doctors will be the specialists of tomorrow."

The dispute stems from a 1999 law that turned the young doctors' scholarships into training-employment contracts. This was to conform to EU directives regarding the professional profile of doctors in training programmes. Following the change in the law no finance bill was set aside to create the necessary budget this would require. Article 25 of the current 2003 budget bill, now being debated, does not resolve the problem and states that the amount of money set for the doctors' scholarships must be the same until 2006.

Public TV and radio staff continue strike in France

On November 13 Public Television and Radio technicians began strike action in a pay dispute. The strike was called by the front syndical, an alliance of the CFDT, CGC, SNRT-CGT, FO, SITR and SNJ trade unions.

The unions are demanding a pay increase of about 10 percent, a rise in the end of year premium, a harmonisation of wage scales and the return to production of programmes by the public services employees.

The SNRT-CGT condemned France 3 (television) which is financed by public money, yet more than 50 percent of its transmissions are produced by private firms. France 3 and France 2 belong to France Télévisions. During the strike at France 3 nearly all programmes in the different French regions as well as the national journals *12-14, 19-20* and *tout le sport* were not broadcasted. At France 3 the call for a strike was supported by more than 30 percent and at France 2 by some 20 percent of the workforce.

The office of the minister of culture and communication said that it would be impossible to increase the wages for the employees of France Télévisions.

At Radio France, which has several channels, only the CGT trade union called for a strike. At France Inter in the course of the three days of strikes, there were only two transmissions. Employees at France Musiques and France Culture also struck affecting the broadcasting of programmes. There was also strike action at the regional channels of France bleu and FIP. At France Info there had been no call to strike by unions but programmes were still affected as some transmissions were disturbed. At the radio channels, wages have not been increased since 1997.

French driving inspectors continue strike

French driving test inspectors began their fifth week of industrial action on November 18 against the initial steps towards privatisation of driving test examinations. At the moment, driving lessons at special schools must be paid, but the examinations are free.

Another issue in the dispute is a shortage of examination personnel. The application of European directives demands 45 minutes of examination for category B driver tests, which in reality only lasts 20 minutes. The 45-minute tests will be compulsory in 2003/2004, but for 2003 there are only 77 new job vacancies planned. The inspectors are also demanding the re-evaluation of their wages.

The Force Ouvriere (FO) trade union that organises most of the drivers said that nearly 70 percent of the 1,000 inspectors nationwide are supporting the strike. During the period of strike action some 100,000 driving tests have been cancelled.

Truck drivers set to strike in France

On November 15, truck drivers in France rejected a pay offer from their employers, the transport ministry. The drivers are mainly members of the CFDT and CGT trade unions who 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.

On that date the unions have threatened to block the motorways if their demands are not met. There are 400,000 transport workers involved in the dispute. The Force Ouvriere's transport section, which had not originally supported the November 22 ultimatum of the other trade unions, is demanding a pay increase of about 12 percent.

Gas and electricity workers hold day of action in France

Gas and electricity workers employed by Gaz de France (GDF) and Electricité de France (EDF) held a day of action on November 14. The action consisted of working stopping work for several hours and some local demonstrations.

The CGT, CFDT, CFE-CGC, CFTC and FO trade unions are involved in the dispute that began in September. Since October the FO has refused to take part in negotiations with government representatives because of fears that they intend to privatisation the industry.

On October 3, 60,000 workers in the industries demonstrated at Paris in the dispute over wages and changes in the pensions system. The government has proposed a 0.6 percent wage rise, which has been rejected by all five unions.

Polish coal miners demonstrate against closures

Coal miners and their supporters marched through the Katowice in southern Poland on November 20 to protest at moves to close unprofitable coalmines.

The government of Prime Minister Lezek Miller plans to close seven coalmines, which would result in the loss of 35,000 jobs. There are currently 140,000 workers employed in coal mining in Poland. Among the organisers of the demonstration was the Solidarity trade union.

Around 10,000 demonstrators marched and chanted slogans such as "thieves". The workers erected seven wooden crosses to symbolise the fate of the mines and carried burning torches. Some of the protesters burnt an effigy of Health Minister Mariusz Lapinski. The march led to traffic being blocked, before it came to a halt outside the provincial governor's office.

A delegation of steelworkers and nurses, who are calling for increases in pay and more money for the health budget, also joined the protest. It has been reported that 40 Katowice miners have gone on hunger strike to protest against the planned closures.

Postal workers in the UK vote to strike over sale to private firm

Postal workers in the UK have voted to strike in protest at the planned sale of the Royal Mail's cash handling business to a private firm, Securicor. The Communication Workers Union balloted 3,000 of its members who are employed in the cash handling section and the overwhelming majority voted to strike.

The cash handling business delivers to and collects cash to post offices across the country.

CWU general secretary Billy Hayes said of the vote, "This is as clear a mandate as anyone could receive. We will go ahead with organisation of strike action within the next few weeks. Because of the seriousness of the situation we are also considering a wider ballot of all our members in the postal industry."

Zambian council workers strike over pay arrears

Council workers in Livingstone, Zambia have gone on strike over a failure to pay their wages. They rejected a government promise to pay K830 million ($US168,700) to clear part of their 10 months salary arrears, saying the amount is not enough. The workers are owed more than K1.5 billion ($US305,000) in salary arrears and retirement benefits.

The Zambia United Local Authorities Workers Union (Zulawu) pleaded with them to end their strike, but branch chairman Herbert Mukuwa failed to placate the workers. Some of the workers have called for the resignation of Town Clerk George Kalenga for failing to do anything to alleviate their suffering in the past.

Striking Nigerian railway workers demand full payment of arrears

Workers on strike at the Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC) have refused to return to work until they are paid their six-month salary arrears. This was the workers response to the Federal Executive Council's approval of N1.2 billion ($US9.65 million) for the arrears during the week ending November 15. They refused the government offer on the grounds that it was not yet backed up with real money.

At a press briefing of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), acting President Alhaji Ado Maigoro said, "We have decided not to suspend the strike until our demand of six months salary arrears and 22 months pensions arrears are met, not with paper action but with cash."

Maigoro said he would be joining a delegation travelling to Abuja to hasten the release of the fund, and said that the strike would continue until this took place. He said the union decided to direct all workers to stay at home because of the difficulties in raising money for transport to work.

Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) president, Adams Oshiomhole, has given verbal support for the strike and hinted that other industrial unions could take action in solidarity. He urged the National Assembly not to approve the 2002 supplementary budget if "it does not provide NRC workers outstanding salaries and the corporation's 22-month pension arrears."

Namibian seamen on strike

Seamen employed by the Ohlthaver and List (O&L) fish factory, Hangana Seafood, at Walvis Bay, Namibia began strike action on November 13. Almost 100 workers were on strike at the company jetty, where all five of the wetfish trawlers were docked since the previous night.

The strike was called by the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (Nafawu) after talks stalled on an increase in commission on the catch value. Nafawu Regional Organiser Cleophas Ngwena said the union had demanded a commission of 0.8 percent of the catch value, while Hangana was only prepared to give 0.3 percent. A media release issued by Hangana had claimed that Nafawu had demanded 30 percent. On November 14, the union leadership said it was planning to continue the strike until their demand for 0.8 percent had been met.

"Everything is getting so expensive. We can't even afford to buy chips and cool drinks any more," said one striking worker. The company and union have already agreed on an increase of 12 percent on basic salaries. The workers said yesterday that they were happy with that, but felt that they needed to get more commission because of the risk of working at sea. Hangana earlier this year acquired the largest deep-sea trawler in Namibia at a cost of more than $N25 million ($US2.6 million).