

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

20 December 2002

German public sector workers hold strike over pay

On December 17 public-sector workers in Germany took national strike action in an ongoing dispute over pay. Workers have held sporadic strikes since December 5.

The action involved members of the Public Service Workers' Union, Verdi, and has impacted on targeted services such as public transport, education and refuse collection. The industrial action led to the cancellation hundreds of flights and long traffic jams. Kindergartens, hospitals and rubbish collection services were also disrupted.

The following day some 10,000 workers held short stoppages across the country, which hit public transport in cities such as Kassel and Mainz. In the town of Flensburg, officials stopped work on counting the points put on drivers' licenses for traffic offences.

Verdi represents four million workers employed on the public sector. The union is calling for a pay increase of three percent and more equality in pay between workers in the east and west of the country.

The Social Democrat-led coalition government of Gerhard Schroeder wants a complete freeze on public sector wages. Interior Minister Otto Schily stated that a three percent increase would cost six billion euros. The government is pledged to keep public spending down to maintain its budget deficit within the three percent shortfall demanded by the European Union's Growth and Stability Pact. Failure to do so could lead to EU sanctions against the country.

Verdi leader Frank Bsirske said that "the conflict will escalate" if an agreement is not reached.

On December 18, talks lasting for 13 hours between the two parties failed leaving the way open for further strike to be held in the New Year.

UK firefighters union threatens further strikes in pay dispute

Firefighters in the UK are to hold two further 48 hour

strikes in January and February in their ongoing dispute over pay. The Fire Brigades' Union announced this week that the two strikes would be held on January 28-30 and February 1-3. The union said that the delay would allow for talks to continue between themselves, the employers and the conciliation service ACAS.

The FBU originally called for a pay increase of 40 percent in order to bring the basic pay of a fully qualified firefighter up to £30,000 a year. The employers and the government rejected this demand out of hand, leading firefighters to hold two strikes in the last month.

The announcement by the union follows the release of the Bain Inquiry into the pay and conditions of firefighters. The review has been widely condemned by firefighters, as it claims that any pay increase has to be self-financed by a raft of changes to working practices.

Railway conductors in northern England to continue strike action

Railway conductors employed by Arriva Trains Northern are to continue their ongoing dispute over pay following the breakdown of talks between the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) and the company.

The conductors have been involved in the dispute for virtually the whole of this year and are to hold a three-day strike next week. The strike will take place on December 21, 23, and 24 with a further strike on New Year's Eve. Conductors employed by Arriva are currently the lowest paid in the country at £15,500.

Zambian hotel workers take action over salary arrears

Zambian hotel workers at the Chainama Hotel sealed off the gate to the hotel on December 16, to further their demand for payment of salary arrears. The workers' salaries arrears since 1997 exceeds than K300 million (\$US61,220). The hotel is owned by former Lusaka Province deputy minister, Sonny Mulenga.

Acting chairman of the staff union, Davies Mulenga,

said the workers had sued Mulenga over the arrears, but he failed to honour the court order. “We won the case but Mr. [Sonny] Mulenga is up to now still holding on to our money,” he said.

Davies Mulenga said that after the failure to honour the court order the staff union appealed to the labour office, which issued a directive to Sonny Mulenga in October 2002 to pay the workers within three months.

Speaking of the failure to follow up on these directives, Davies Mulenga said that “we want to know if Sonny Mulenga is above the law.” He said the hotel records for February-October indicated that the hotel had made K485,140 million (\$US99 million). “And only last week we had a function and K78 million [\$US15,900] was realised as down payment but still he can’t pay us.”

Gambian medical research workers in sit-down strike

Members of the Medical Research Council Workers Union (MRCWU) in Gambia began a sit-down strike on December 12, following the suspension of union leaders by the MRC management. Other than the outpatient clinic, security and the laboratory, work came to a standstill in all other departments at the Fajara headquarters.

The dispute began when the MRCWU protested against the ban on cooked food being taken into MRC wards by patients’ relatives for patients to keep and eat later. Officials of the MRC clinical services claimed that food being stored in the wards was a primary cause of a cockroach infestation, and that dietary management was an important part of medical treatment. However, the workers objected to this total ban on food in the wards.

The management then suspended the union leaders, for organising a protest that was labelled an “intervention in matters of clinical and professional judgement.” Meanwhile, similar sit-down strikes were taking place in other MRC branches across the country.

Following the intervention of government mediators and the revocation of the suspension of their union leaders, the workers returned to work. According to the press report, officers of the Armed Forces, National Intelligence Agency (NIA) and police were seen at the MRC branch in Farafenni, as soon as news got out that the workers were on strike. Officers in civilian clothes were brought in, supposedly to “broker a peace through

dialogue in the interest of law and order.”



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