

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

6 December 2002

## Italian pilots strike as rail strike is called off

Alitalia pilots and flight attendants staged a four-hour strike on November 29, forcing the Italian national carrier to scrap 78 flights—54 domestic and 24 international—and reschedule 148.

A rail strike originally scheduled for the weekend was postponed, on the basis that it would worsen the suffering caused by flooding in much of Italy. No new date for the train strike was announced by the trade unions.

Torrential rains have caused widespread flooding throughout northern Italy. Thousands had to evacuate their homes, while many roads were made impassable or at risk from landslides.

## French bus and public traffic workers strike

A strike halting nearly all 430 buses owned by the local authority began in Bordeaux on November 25. The strike was called by the FO and CGT trade unions against the CONNEX company.

The unions are calling for an increase in pay to cover 2002 and 2003 and the employment of more security personnel to reduce the increasing aggression that drivers face from members of the public.

In the town of Nancy on November 25 only two fifths of public traffic was operational as workers struck in a dispute over better working conditions, an increase in wages and the employment of more staff.

The strike is being organised by the Force Ouvrière, CFDT and CFTC trade unions. At the end of the second day on November 26, some conductors of the Nancy CONNEX held captive one of the directors of CONNEX for a period.

## Education assistants demonstrate in Paris against cuts

On November 27 a demonstration of education assistants was held in Paris in front of the Ministry of Education. The workers are protesting against government plans to dismiss thousands of the education assistant positions over the next year.

All the trade unions involved in the dispute, with the exception of the right wing university union, walked out of the round table negotiations to discuss the future of the education assistants.

The government plans to replace the assistants with volunteers, including family members of those attending schools. The parents' organisation FCPE accused the government of putting repression on the agenda instead of supporting children. Xavier Darcos, the Minister of Education, has insisted in an article in the *Le Parisien* newspaper on fencing in schools, employing CCTV cameras and electronic doors in the most crime ridden parts of the towns and cities in France.

## SNCF rail workers in France continue strike action

On November 26 guards employed by the SNCF state railway service in the region of Toulouse continued strike action in an ongoing dispute over working conditions relating to the introduction of the winter time table.

The trade unions involved in the strike include the CGT, CFDT, SUD and Force Ouvrière. The strike resulted in the halting of 95 percent of normal regional rail traffic as well as some of the long distance trains such as the TGV.

In other regions union assemblies were held on November 28 to decide about guards taking industrial action. The CGT stated that at least 50 guards are needed as a minimum in the various areas.

On November 28 SNCF directors offered to employ 23 new staff in different task-areas for 2003. Despite this the strikers decided to continue their industrial action against general job cuts.

The president of SNCF Louis Gallois has offered the 55,000 staff a pay increase of just 0.4 percent. This follows a 0.8 percent rise in July and one of 0.4 percent in October, below the rate of inflation which stands at 1.9 percent. The CFDT trade union is demanding an increase of 125 euros a month. The CGT is calling for a six percent increase immediately, a minimum wage at first employment with the company and a minimum pension of 1,400 euros. The SUD trade union rail section called the offer a parody and announced that it would mobilise its members in opposition. The Force Ouvrière called the November 26 strike and for an inter-union meeting to discuss the offer.

On December 2 railway workers at Creutzwald and Beining occupied the railway stations in opposition to planned privatisation measures.

## French students in Toulouse protest against education reforms

Students at the University of Mirail in Toulouse ended their four week protest against education reforms. The university has 27,000 students who opposed the changes in national education being planned by harmonisation of European diplomas.

On November 13 students blockaded the faculty entrance and made a national appeal. On November 27 the blockade was ended after the president of the university accepted the matriculation of 400 young students who had been excluded as a consequence of new rules.

The students fear that the proposed European system 3/5/8 (licence, maîtrise, doctorat) could devalue the French diplomas and put the faculties into competition. During the dispute they also criticised the introduction of a new evaluation system. Students also fear an increase in the influence of business at the faculties.

The student bodies have called a national demonstration to be held on December 12 together with Spanish and Portuguese students who have the same concerns.

## France 3 media workers continue strike

The dispute between France 3 media staff that began on November 15 continued last week following a management ultimatum to end the industrial action by November 29.

Management made an offer of a one off payment of 300 euros for the employees with the lowest wages and for those employees whose

wages have risen less than eight percent since 1997. They have also made some concessions concerning the demands about production locations. They stated that they intend to maintain six production places at Lille, Lyon, Toulouse, Marseille, Strasbourg and Rennes and that 11 million euros would be made available for regional programmes.

The CGT and CFDT say that the main conflict is that there is no transparency of the contracts that exist between France 3 and exterior private producers, one of them being the British “Freemantle Media”. A representative of the SNJ-Sgt union said that they want more attention from the government. Jean-Jaques Aillogon, the Minister of Culture and Communication said that he had invited the unions to further discussions.

#### **Firefighters in Nice, France continue strike**

More than 300 firefighters demonstrated in Nice on December 2 in pursuit of a 35-hour week and payment for supplementary work. The employees work 2,400 hours a year instead of 1,600 and 800 of these hours are unpaid. The firefighters have been striking since October 22.

#### **Workers in Israeli military industry set to strike**

Workers at the state-owned Israel Military Industries (IMI) are to take industrial action in protest at the government’s delay in transferring aid of NIS 1.3 billion to the troubled manufacturer. Staff representative Moshe Even-Shuah said that workers would be staging demonstrations accompanied by tyre-burning and blocking off of the main thoroughfares around the IMI’s plants.

The vice-president of Finance and Control at IMI, Ronen Wolfman, told the Knesset Economics Committee last week that each day that went by without a recovery programme in place cost the company NIS 1 million.

Part of the committee’s remit was to address the issue of the recovery plan for the military manufacturer, which, according to representatives of the Histadrut labour federation and IMI workers, would save hundreds of jobs and guarantee levels of compensation packages for those to be laid off.

The state government has guaranteed NIS 25 million to the firm, which has debts of NIS 3 billion. These guarantees have been attacked by the IMI staff and Histadrut as merely a dangerous delay of the recovery plan. Histadrut head and Knesset member Amir Peretz described the guarantees as the Finance Ministry’s safety cushion; “artificial respiration”, which served only to “put off the solution that could save 4,000 jobs.”

Peretz estimated that 15,000 families in total were dependent on the IMI.

Chairman of IMI’s board Arie Mizrahi told the Knesset committee that the company had orders on its books of around \$1.5 billion—which he described as “an unprecedented level”—but that given the continued troubles of the debt-laden firm, some suppliers were cancelling their orders.

Even-Shuah said that the cash injection was part of the company’s recovery plan, which had been agreed between the management and workers a few weeks ago. The plan includes increased compensation packages for 900 workers that stand to lose their jobs, as well as a 10 percent wage cut for the remaining staff—a move that will save the firm NIS 80 million a year.

“No workers’ organisation in the past decade has agreed to cut back so severely on its wages,” Even-Shuah complained yesterday. “And yet the treasury is not prepared to make do with that, but sets additional demands on us as a condition for receiving aid for the company.”

#### **National strike by local government workers in Botswana**

Local government workers in Botswana held a two-week national strike to demand higher wages. The strike stopped public transport, cut medical care, shut down local council services and closed abattoirs. It was suspended on December 3 following late-night talks between union representatives and President Festus Mogae.

The strike started on November 18, after the government failed to respond to union demands for salary increases, even after a court ruling that a 14-year-old “Job Evaluation Exercise” had not been properly carried out by management. The government’s inaction meant that employees of local councils receive lower wages than their central government counterparts.

The Botswana Unified Local Government Services Authority (BULGSA) said that labour laws deny public service unions the right to negotiate salaries and working conditions with the government. Salary reviews are held only when the employers see fit. “It is not that we are spoiling for a fight,” said spokesman Motelebane Motelebane. After the talks, the union said that the strike was suspended pending the government response and the decisions of a union conference next week.

BULGSA estimated that 98 percent of the 100,000 local government employees were out on strike. Most local health clinics were closed down resulting in the government hospitals in Gaborone and Francistown becoming jammed with patients. The two state referral hospitals filled beyond capacity, with some patients lying on the floor.

The strike won support from a range of other unions and was the biggest in the country for 12 years. In one of the largest demonstrations ever seen in the capital, thousands of workers poured onto the streets of Gaborone on November 21 to back the strike. Local government strikers were joined by academic and support staff from the University of Botswana who took strike action during the week ending November 29 demanding a six percent salary increase.

Botswana has relatively high living standards by African standards due to its reliance on diamond production. It has been favourably regarded by international investors, in part due to the low level of strike activity.

#### **State assembly workers on strike in Nigeria**

Staff at the Benue State House of Assembly in Nigeria have been on strike for over two weeks in opposition to their employers’ refusal to pay outfit allowances for the past three years. The Assembly staff walked out on strike on November 18 to demand payment of the allowances, which have accumulated to about N13 million (\$105,000).

The workers have threatened to take members of the state legislature to court over the issue. They said their turn to the legal option followed the refusal of employers to pay them, even after they have tried dialogue, consultation and strike action, all of which had failed to yield positive results over the last three years.

The strike is the second to take place in less than two months, and is likely to cause the Benue legislature to fail the requirement that it functions for at least 181 days of the year, as stipulated in the Nigerian Constitution.



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