

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

28 February 2003

Parisian artists and musicians strike against government benefit plans

Many of Paris' operas and theatres were closed on February 25, as thousands of artists and musicians protested against government plans to change their unemployment insurance benefits.

An estimated 30,000 artists and their supporters protested in the streets, according to the FNSAC-CGT artists union. Demonstrators gathered in front of the National Opera and proceeded to march to the Olympia. One banner read, "Coming soon in theatres nationwide: nothing." All of Paris' theatres and many cinemas cancelled their evening shows, while film shooting and movie set construction was halted for the day.

The protests followed a statement from the government that it is considering reforming the system allowing performing arts workers to receive unemployment benefits during periods in which they have little or no work. The plan is part of a package aimed at cutting public spending.

Refuse workers take unofficial action in England

On February 25, refuse workers employee by Onyx and contracted to Bromley Council took unofficial strike action to protest redundancies and cuts in overtime. The walkout involved 100 workers who had been told that the company had underestimated the cost of fulfilling its contract with Bromley Council. Staff are opposed to plans that they fear will lead to a cut in overtime, weekend work and up to 10 jobs. In November 2001, Onyx signed a £200 million, 14-year contract with Bromley Council to remove 200,000 tonnes of rubbish from 125,000 properties per year.

A Transport & General Workers Union representative said "this was not organised by T&G. People get concerned about their working rights but we have informed the staff we would usually recommend going through proper routes."

Car parts workers strike in Shrewsbury, England

Car parts workers employed by the Stadco engineering firm in Shrewsbury took strike action on February 24 over changes in working practices introduced without consultation.

The walkout involved around 200 workers who struck for 24 hours in the first of two planned strikes. The second strike is set for March 3. A ban on overtime also began on February 21.

The UK operation director of the company admitted that workers disagreed with a new policy of monitoring sickness leave within the company.

A trade union shop steward at the plant said, "We are open to negotiations."

Thousands of workers strike car plant in Romania

Some 5,000 workers employed by Romania's biggest car manufacturer, Automobile Dacia, struck on February 23 in pursuit of higher wages. The strike was held by the workers at the company's plant in the city of Pitesti 110 kilometres (69 miles) Northwest of Bucharest and follows a breakdown in negotiations between management and the trade union at the plant.

Automobile Dacia employs about 16,500 employees at the plant where France's Renault SA holds a majority stake. The workers are calling for an increase in pay of more than 20 percent. According union sources the average monthly salary at the factory is just 123 euros (\$US133).

Orange Call centre staff strike in Switzerland

On February 20 call centre staff employed by the telecommunications firm, Orange, struck to demand better redundancy deals. During the strike 450 workers protested outside Orange facilities in Zurich, Biel and Lausanne. Around 200 workers are set to lose their jobs as part of Oranges' restructuring of its 1,692-strong Swiss workforce this year.

Two-day general strike in Algeria

Striking government workers brought much of Algeria, with the exception of its oil fields, to a halt on February 25 and 26, in protest at the government's

privatisation programme. The General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA) called the strike. Abdelmadjid Sidi Said, head of the UGTA, said that less than five percent of the union's three million members had ignored the strike call.

The Algerian economy has been state-controlled for four decades, ever since it became independent from France in 1963. The present government is now hoping to attract foreign investment by privatising the economy and integrating into the world market.

In September 2002 the energy and mines minister, Chakib Khelil, declared the government's intention to privatise the state-owned Sonatrach, which has a monopoly over the country's oil and gas sector. The UGTA opposed this on the grounds that Sonatrach was being sold off at an unacceptably low price. Sales of oil and gas account for 95 percent of Algeria's hard currency revenue, and the impact of the government's programme on workers' living standards is certain to be severe.

The strike was also protesting the rundown of Algeria's social security and pension schemes and the erosion of wages. UGTA is demanding that the minimum wage be increased from its current level of 8,000 dinars (around 120 euros/dollars) per month. Almost one third of Algeria's workers are currently unemployed, and for the under-30s this rises to 50 percent.

The transport, banking, health and educational sectors were all brought to a halt by the strike. The national airline Air Algerie was able to fly only a handful of its aircraft on domestic routes. The rail network was completely shut down for passengers and freight traffic. State-run newspapers were not published, many banks and schools remained closed and hospitals were providing minimal services.

Oil tankers continued to be loaded in Algeria's ports, and gas supplies were sent to Europe by pipeline as normal.

Civil servants strike in Guinea-Bissau

Civil servants in Guinea-Bissau initiated a five-day strike on February 24. They have not received their salaries for at least six months, and some are owed payment for 12 months. More than 95 percent of the workers heeded the strike call, halting work at all government offices. Only the staff of the presidency and the prime minister's office worked on the first day

of the strike.

The organisers threatened to extend the strike if there was no significant advancement on their demands. Besides payment of their arrears, the strikers are also demanding free access to medical care and food subsidies.

Guinea-Bissau also faces a political crisis, with the government arresting and detaining opponents ahead of parliamentary elections on April 20, leading to doubts as to whether the elections will be held at all.

University of Zimbabwe lecturers strike

The University of Zimbabwe (UZ) failed to open this week at the start of a new academic year, as 600 lecturers took indefinite strike action. Members of the Association of University Teachers (AUT) are demanding a 50 percent retention allowance on their basic salaries in line with that paid to staff in the Faculty of Medicine. The number of lecturers employed at the university is half the official level required due to many staff fleeing the country.



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