

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

7 February 2003

## Thousands demonstrate in France to protest pension reform

On February 1, 106 demonstrations were held throughout France to protest government plans to raise the retirement age beyond 60, and increase the size of employee's pension contributions.

Organised by a number of trade unions, the protests involved some 150,000 people. In Paris 50,000 demonstrated, 20,000 in Marseille and 13,000 in Toulouse. A banner on the Marseille demonstration read, "Raffarin wants us to work until we're dead." In Toulouse demonstrators chanted, "They exploit us, they fire us—it's up to management to pay our pensions."

Protests were also held in La Réunion, a French territory in the Indian Ocean. Some 400 people demonstrated against a reduction of pensions benefits in the capital, Saint Denis de La Réunion.

## Pilots at Air France continue strikes over pay

On February 2, pilots at Air France began a strike resulting in the halting of dozens of scheduled flights at the airports of Roissy-Charles de Gaulle and Orly. On the first day of the strike more than 200 flights were cancelled and just 40 to 60 percent of flights went ahead. Air France schedules about 1,700 daily domestic and international flights.

The strike was being organised by the three pilots' unions and lasted until January 5. The action is being held as the result of a long-standing dispute that began last September over pay.

## University of Toulouse to strike in protest at budget cuts

The counsel of administration of the University of Sciences Paul Sabatier Toulouse III at the University of Toulouse announced on February 3 that it would halt lessons on February 5 until February 10 to protest against cuts of 620,000 euros in the 2003 budget. One thousand students also voted to support the strike at a general assembly meeting, with demonstrations planned for February 6.

## Paris newspaper distribution workers strike

On January 30 and 31, the distribution of the *Nouvelles Messageries de la presse Parisienne* newspaper was stopped in Paris and the surrounding regions as workers struck in opposition to restructuring arrangements being implemented by the NMPP enterprise, which distributes the journals.

The restructuring plans are part of efforts to offset a company deficit of 39 million euros, and are thought to include wage cuts of up to 30 percent and some 50 percent of the workforce being laid off.

## Railway workers in Slovakia strike to oppose cuts in services

On February 1, rail workers in Slovakia began strike action to protest a decision by the railway companies ZS and ZSR to abolish a number of regional and other railway routes. The indefinite strike began at 23.00 hours following the failure of talks between railway trade unions and management and it is estimated that up to 80 percent of railway workers were involved. The industrial action also affected international routes that stop at national borders or travel via neighbouring countries.

Further talks are expected to be held in the near future but the rail companies have so far responded to the strikes by filing for legal action to ban the strikes.

## London lecturers strike over cost of living

Lecturers in London held their second one-day strike on February 4 resulting in the closure of universities and affecting 120,000 students. Called by the Association of University Teachers in pursuit of a higher living allowance for working in the capital, lecturers at more than 40 institutions were involved.

The union has said that the London weighting allowance (a yearly cost of living allowance for living in London) has been virtually frozen for many lecturers for over a decade. The allowances for lecturers in pre-1992 universities stand at £2,134, while lecturers in the "new" universities are allocated a London weighting that can be as low as £603. The unions are calling for an allowance of £4,000 for university academic and non-academic staff.

## UK firefighters suspend strike action

On February 3, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) agreed to suspend its series of strike action over pay, following talks involving government ministers, Local Authority employers and representatives from the Trade Union Congress (TUC).

Firefighters had been involved in nationwide strike action aimed at securing a pay increase that would bring their salaries to £30,000 per annum: a demand rejected by the government. The talks begun just hours over firefighters had ended their latest 48 hour strike, held over a total of 15 days.

With the Blair government finalising its preparations to join a US-led war against Iraq, every effort had been made to bring the strike to a close. Thousands of troops from the armed forces have been used to provide emergency cover during the action at the cost of more than £90 million.

In the end the government has been able to rely on the FBU to get the dispute off the agenda, at least in the short-term, so as to enable its military build up in the Persian Gulf. Despite winning no firm agreement on any of its demands, the FBU executive agreed to suspend the strike, describing the talks as “constructive”. FBU leader Andy Gilchrist also announced that the six-hour meeting of the executive had “unanimously agreed not to set further dates for strike action at this stage.”

Talks between the union, local authorities and government representatives are expected to continue next week.

### **Autoworkers at Rover in the UK to be balloted for industrial action in pay dispute**

Employees at the MG Rover group in the UK are to be balloted for strike action after rejecting a company pay offer of just 2.2 percent. The offer was rejected by 81 percent of workers balloted at Rover’s factory in Longbridge, Birmingham.

The vote was taken by members of the Transport and General Workers’ Union and a total of 2,704 members of the TGWU, Amicus and the GMB trade unions have now rejected the pay offer with 619 voting in favour.

Dave Osborne, national officer of the TGWU said that the company was “out of touch with the workforce” and “that in the light of the massive vote of rejection the company will come back with an improvement. We will be making an application to ballot our members on industrial action as it is apparent from this vote just how dissatisfied they are with the company’s offer.”

The company stated that the offer was part of a five-year turnaround business plan and that it already been

accepted by employees in its engine division.

### **Namibian University workers on strike over pay**

Academic and non-academic staff at the University of Namibia (UNAM) began a strike on February 5, to demand a pay rise following a ballot in which 94 percent voted in favour of action.

The staff rejected a last-minute offer of an 8 percent salary increase, and refused to call off their strike. Representatives of the Namibia Public Workers’ Union (NAPWU) and Namibia National Teachers’ Union (NANTU) met UNAM Vice Chancellor Peter Katjavivi on February 4. At the meeting Katjavivi said UNAM would partially meet a 16.5 percent across-the-board agreement but said this could not be guaranteed until the government had approved an additional subsidy for the payment. The offer was rejected by staff as “not good enough”.

### **Strike of transport workers in Nigeria**

Members of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) in Abuja, Nigeria, went on strike at the end of last month to protest ill treatment and financial extortion by members of the Directorate of Road Traffic Services (VIOs).

Union members explained that the VIOs have been extorting money from them while they were on the roads, with amounts ranging from 3,000-20,000 naira (128 naira = \$US1 ). “Including days of public holiday not even Independent, Sallah, Christmas days are exempted from the heinous act of these VIO men,” they explained, adding that they sometimes went as far as to beat the drivers.

Union chairman at Berger Junction, Muhammad Umar, said that the union was now advising its members to delay action pending the outcome of negotiations between management and workers.



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