

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

4 April 2003

UK rail guards strike over safety

On March 28, 3,000 train guards throughout the UK took industrial action in the first of three scheduled 24-hour strikes. The guards, members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are holding the industrial action over the companies' plans to diminish the safety role of guards on trains.

The guards struck nine train companies including Silverlink, ScotRail, Thames Trains, Connex South Eastern, Govia South Central, Arriva Train, Central Trains, Virgin Cross Country, Virgin West Coast. Two further strikes are to be held over the next few weeks.

The strike stopped nine out of 10 trains running on Virgin Cross Country and Central Trains. On Thames Trains, however, 90 percent of services were running as many of their trains are driver-only operated services.

In an effort to break the strike some of the companies employed managers who they claimed had been "trained". Central Trains' managing director Nick Brown said: "We are running some trains in the West Midlands and East Midlands, using management staff who have obviously been trained."

Prior to the strike it was announced that £10 million of taxpayers' money would be granted to the train companies in compensation for loss of business during the strikes. RMT general secretary Bob Crow said, "The underlying agenda of these train operating companies is to do away with the guards, save their wages and turn big profits into bigger profits for their shareholders."

Firefighters in Wiltshire, England prepare to strike

Firefighters in Wiltshire, England are currently balloting for strike action in a dispute over plans for a new "joint control centre".

The fire service in the county is preparing to share its control room facilities with the ambulance service and the emergency 999 police telephone line. The centre has been built at a cost of £7 million and training of staff is already underway. The result of the strike ballot is to be announced on Friday April 4.

The Fire Brigades Union has opposed the plans stating that the control centre will slow down the way its calls are dealt with and consequently put more lives at risk.

Joint control centres form a critical part of the Fire Authorities plans to restructure the service. The changes are outlined in the government commissioned Bain Report, which

has been opposed by firefighters throughout the UK.

Britain's firefighters are still currently in dispute with the government and Local Authorities over wages and working conditions.

Sixth form college staff strike in Cardiff, Wales

Teachers at St David's sixth-form college in Cardiff, Wales struck on April 1 in a dispute over pay. The action led to the closure of the college for 24 hours affecting some 1,100 pupils aged 16 to 19. Some 120 employees from three education unions participated in the strike.

The teachers claim that they are paid up to £3,000 less than staff in England. Unions say that their members have met agreed professional standards, but are not being paid accordingly because the college had spent its money elsewhere.

The unions' regional official Rex Phillips said: "This will be the first of a series of one-day strikes, until we get a satisfactory outcome. The teachers have waited long enough. Taking strike action is the only course left open to them."

French metal workers continue industrial action

The strike by workers at metal plants at Fortech and Interforge at Issoire and Les Aciéries at Les Ancizes is continuing. At Issoire all the staff at both factories remain on strike while at Les Ancizes the strike is being held for four hours a day.

The workers are involved in a struggle over pay. Whilst the CGT trade union has refused to negotiate on a single plant basis in the dispute, other unions involved have reduced their wage increase demand from 6 percent to 4 percent.

Management have rejected this, however, offering an increase of 30 euros for the worst paid workers, and 2.2 percent for all others. The company has also sought legal action to break the strike but on two occasions its charges against striking workers and those blockading the plants have been rejected by the law courts.

On March 21, striking workers occupied the headquarters at Clermont-Ferrand, where the negotiations had taken place and held one of the managers hostage for several hours.

Workers responded to a management call for non-strikers to break the dispute with an appeal for the backing of workers across the region. On March 24, hundreds of cars of families and neighbours gathered at the plants to support the workers. Regional business people, local majors, and other local representatives have also offered support.

Non-teaching staff strike and demonstrate in France

Members of the union of psychological advisers (Co-Psy) and social assistants in the education sector held a strike on March 27 to protest the transfer of more than 100,000 employees of national education under the responsibility of regional and local facilities. The Co-Psy and social assistants fear that decentralisation will result in an attack on their statutory rights and social standards.

On the same day a demonstration was convened between the Sorbonne University and Ministry of Education in Paris. At the rally, trade union leaders called on all public service workers to participate in a national day of industrial action on April 3, against the decentralisation measures of the Raffarin national administration. The day of action coincides with another protest called by the public service unions to defend pension rights.

Satellite production workers in Toulouse protest job losses

Some 1,400 workers at the satellite producing enterprise Astrium, a branch of the space travel enterprise EADS, demonstrated on March 25 in Toulouse to protest proposed job cuts and the transfer of the Ariane 5 and ATV projects to Germany.

On March 10, the management had announced 1,700 additional job losses—1,600 effective immediately. Unions at Toulouse fear this means the loss of almost half the existing 2,400 workforce.

Nigeria public sector strike called off

Nigeria's trade union federation, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) called off a planned three-day public sector strike this week, on the very day it was due to start. The strike was for a 12.5 percent pay rise.

Some public sector workers went ahead with a planned strike, either because they had not heard the news, or because they disagreed with the decision. On March 31, aviation workers requested all foreign airliners not to enter Nigerian airspace for the 72 hours of the strike. On April 1, civil servants were on strike in Ibadan, Yenagoa, Makurdi, Calabar and Asaba, while the Nasarawa State Government had declared a three-day public holiday. In Lagos, the local government secretariats were empty, as were the government offices in the state capitals of Benue and Cross River.

The planned strike was a delayed response to the government's failure to meet previous agreements. In 2000 the NLC and the government had agreed on a phased wage review, the first phase of which was a 25 percent wage increase in 2001 and another 15 per cent in 2002.

By 2001 the NLC agreed to a government request to defer the first 25 percent increase in view of the weak state of the Nigerian economy. Implementation of this first phase was then supposed to take place not later than May 2002. Nigerian President Obasanjo has now said that the government did not agree to this. The NLC then took part in a joint committee to review the agreement, which reduced the figure from 25 to 12.5 percent. After the agreement was signed, Obasanjo went on to

renege on this too, leading to the latest threat of strike action.

After late night talks with the government, including the President, the NLC agreed to a joint working party that will "work out the modalities for implementing the salary increases as it affects all grade levels." By allowing the government to yet again defer wage increases to the impoverished public sector workers—the official annual inflation rate is now 12.3 per cent—the unions averted a major crisis in the run-up to elections later this month. The strike would have included workers in the oil sector, threatening a complete shutdown in the industry that has already lost up to 40 percent of normal production due to the conflict in the Niger Delta region.

Kenyan sugar drivers win rights

Drivers at the Mumias Sugar factory in Kenya have won the right to join a trade union of their choice after a strike that lasted 28 days. The 600 sugar cane transporters went on strike out of "frustration" with their employers and to demand the right to join trade unions.

Local farmers had joined the drivers on strike to protest the reduction in prices paid for their sugar cane from Sh2,015 (\$US26.52) per tonne to Sh1,750 (\$US 23). After the drivers returned, the farmers still refused to deliver any cane, insisting that they would not do so until the price was returned to its former level.

In response to the farmers' action, the sugar company has started harvesting cane on its own estates, but the farmers have ridiculed this, claiming that the cane being harvested was not sufficient to keep the factory running.

Teachers accuse Kenyan government of renegeing on pledge

The Kenyan National Union of Teachers (Knut) Nairobi branch accused the newly elected National Rainbow Coalition (Narc) government of renegeing on its pledge to implement a salary increase within its first 100 days.

Nairobi Knut Executive Secretary, Mr Muriu Kamau, said "We now believe they wanted our votes and nothing more. It is true the union was caught up between a hard rock and hard place and we were duped into voting the previous regime out of office." The union appealed to President Mwai Kibaki to honour the election pledge.

Teachers in Kiambu District to the north of Nairobi sent round a circular also accusing Narc of failing to keep its election pledge. The circular said that Knut officials had been compromised and teachers were at liberty to take to the streets and demand their rights. A meeting that was to be convened to discuss strike action was barred from taking place by anti-riot police.



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