Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

11 April 2003

French public workers strike to protest government pension attacks

On April 3 a national day of action was held in France, involving some one hundred demonstrations against the attack on the public service pension insurance system.

Hundreds of thousands of people took part all over France. At Paris and Marseille 80,000 demonstrated, with 35,000 in the capital Paris. In Bordeaux 10,000 people attended a march and rally.

The government plans to increase the contributory number of years that workers must pay, introduce a higher retirement age and impose partially private pension insurance. On April 11 the right-wing Jean-Pierre Raffarin administration will put the project into legislative form. The government is the only one in Europe has not yet achieved significant pension cuts.

Around 5,200,000 civil servants are employed in the public sector, who make up 25 percent of the workforce and currently have a 37.5 year contribution period for a full pension compared to 40 years in the private sector. Among the demands of the trade unions is that for each person reaching the retirement age, a new person is to be employed.

As a result of the strikes and protests, there was widespread disruption to the short distance routes of the SNCF rail service, mainly in the Paris region.

At Paris' two airports, Charles de Gaulle and Orly, 70 percent of flights were cancelled as a result of strike action by air-traffic controllers. Air France said it had cancelled 55 percent of its short and medium-haul flights, but all long-haul flights were operating normally. Foreign carriers cancelled some international flights.

In Paris only half of the métros and 40 percent of the busses ran. In the other towns the strike rate on public traffic was varied. In Marseille it ran at 90 percent and in Dijon, Rennes, Reims, Lyon, Amiens, Tours, Bordeaux, Grenoble, Toulouse and Besancon from 20 to 60 percent.

The education system was also affected, with teacher participation in the strike at about 50 percent. Workers employed at La Poste, the telecommunication service, were also involved as were museum employees.

Workers at French weapons manufacturer oppose large-scale job cuts

Giat Industries, France's state-owned weapons maker, has announced cuts that could see more than half its workforce lose their jobs over the next two years. On April 7, GIAT announced the dismissal of 3,940 of the 5,587 employees until the year 2006. The group has plants at Roanne, Verseilles-Satory, Bourges, Tarbes, Saint-Chamond, Toulouse, Tulle, Saint-Etienne, Cusset and Chapelle-Saint-Ursin.

On April 8 in the town of Toulouse, where 325 job losses are projected, nearly all of the 430 workforce blocked the entrance of the plant and then marched to the major's office, which was closed. In the afternoon the workers organised a meeting to discuss further actions.

At Tarbes (Hautes-Pyrénées) 640 of 792 jobs will be lost. In response some 400 workers organised a general assembly in the morning and then a demonstration.

The unions issued a nationalist and protectionist statement in response to the job losses, which was based on defending the French "national interest". It read in part, "At the moment when France must do all to maintain its instruments of defence, including the moment where Europe is more then ever split about this subject, it is paradoxical that France is parting from an irreplaceable element of its defence and its national sovereignty."

Security staff in England to strike to demand pay increase

Security guards employed by Securicor have voted to take strike action for three days from midnight on April 14 in a dispute over pay and crewing. Securicor delivers £1.5 billion a day to banks and shops around the UK. Workers are calling for an increase of a pay offer of just 2.5 percent from the company and are opposing its plans to introduce one-person staffing throughout the business. Securicor staff are paid at a rate of just £7 an hour.

In the ballot for industrial action a majority of 82 percent voted in favour of strike action.

Autoworkers in England vote to strike in pay dispute

On April 9 MG Rover workers at the Longbridge plant in England voted for industrial action in a dispute over pay. The employees voted by a majority of 61 percent to 39 percent in a ballot organised by the Transport and General Workers Union.

The company has offered the workers a 2.2 percent rise in basic pay.

Staff at the plant who are members of the Amicus trade union are also being balloted for strike action. Were industrial action to take place it would be the first since the company was purchased by the Phoenix consortium three years ago from BMW, the German based car manufacturer.

Zambian University staff reject pay offer

Workers at the Copperbelt University in Zambia have continued strike action and rejected a 32 percent pay rise. Copperbelt University Senior Administration Staff Association (CUSASA) chairman, Kanyanta Muyangwa, said that the increase was only two percent more than an offer they had rejected earlier. The unions are demanding a 150 percent pay rise.

Public sector workers in Zambia threatened a nationwide strike if the government refused to pay a 1.5 million kwacha ($US300) salary increase. Zambia's Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflections (JCTR) which collects monthly data on the cost of living calculates that a family of six needs just over a million kwacha a month (roughly $US200) for a "basic needs basket".

Zimbabwean telecom workers strike over pay

Zimbabwean telecommunications workers at TelOne are on national strike for the third time this year against TelOne's refusal to comply with a High Court order to reinstate their salaries for the year 2000.

The secretary-general of the Communications and Allied Workers' Union of Zimbabwe, Gift Chimanikire, said the workers had halted activity at all TelOne stations, disrupting telecommunications all over the country.

Since the High Court ruling in 2001, workers at TelOne have held frequent sit-ins to demand that the company comply. After industrial action last month, the management of TelOne and Zimpost agreed to pay the outstanding salaries to over 4,800 workers from the disbanded Posts and Telecommunications Corporation. The PTC later reversed this decision, blaming cash-flow problems, provoking the current strike.

TelOne's acting managing director, Humpton Mhlanga claimed the strike was illegal and instructed all managers to deduct salaries against any worker who did not turn up for work.

The struggles of the telecom workers are part of a wave of strikes that have hit Zimbabwe since the beginning of this year, involving miners, bankworkers, postal and powerworkers, council employees as well as workers in the textile and broadcasting industries. Workers are protesting against the intolerable living conditions in Zimbabwe, with an annual inflation rate of 175 percent and half the population—6.7 million people—facing famine.

Widespread opposition to government policies culminated in a two-day general strike last month, which was called by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

The MDC is now attempting to put the brakes on anti-government actions by the working class and has abandoned plans for further strikes. On April 5 MDC spokesman Paul Themba Nyathi told the *Standard* that, with the backing of the "international community", the party was calling off future "stay-aways" and would concentrate on efforts to get Mugabe back to the negotiating table. This week's industrial action by the telecom workers demonstrates that working class action is not so easily contained.

Kenyan government reports on strike wave

According to a report by the Kenyan Ministry of Labour and Human Resource Development, more than 564,000 man-hours have been lost through 93 strikes since the beginning of this year. Over 32, 000 workers were involved. The report says that the unprecedentedly high number of strikes were due to disputes over low wages, long working hours, underpayment and arbitrary dismissals. It says that one reason for this was the employment of casual labour for long hours, claiming that employers were "ignorant" of the country's labour laws.

Since the defeat of the hated government of President Daniel Arap Moi in January, there has been a wave of strikes as workers have become impatient for the improvement in living conditions promised by the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC).

At a meeting between trade unions, employers and the government at which the report was presented, union leaders reported that the Tailors and Textile Workers Union had recruited more than 12,000 workers at the Export Processing Zones. They claimed that since the union had been allowed to operate in the zones, they were able "to solve disputes that had paralysed the textile sector". The government asked the unions and employers to give them the names of non-governmental organisations that, it is claimed, are inciting industrial unrest; suggesting that they were operating illegally.