

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

18 April 2003

Italian airline workers protest attacks on jobs and working conditions

On April 14, airline workers and air traffic controllers employed by the Italian airliner Alitalia held an eight-hour stoppage in a dispute over the company's planned cost-cutting measures. The strike was called by nine trade unions with members at Alitalia.

The workforce at the airline is protesting against numerous attacks on their wages and conditions. Pilots and flight attendants are striking against cuts in staffing levels. The air traffic controllers are demanding increased salaries and better working conditions and catering staff are opposed to threatened job losses.

As a result of the industrial action Alitalia was forced to cancel 320 flights, including 150 international flights. Around 31,000 passengers were left stranded due to the action.

The strike had a widespread impact with other European airlines having to cancel flights. Ryanair cancelled 36 Italian flights and British Airways cancelled 24 flights and rescheduled 20. Air France cancelled six flights to Paris, Marseille and Lyon and Spanish carrier Iberia cancelled three flights to Madrid and Barcelona. The German based airline Lufthansa cancelled 36 flights.

The company has said its cuts are aimed at "modifying and simplifying" the workforce. Airline trade unions plan to hold further talks with the company and they have scheduled another strike to be held from May 10 to 15.

In a separate dispute, workers employed by SEA, a firm that manages Milan's two airports, Linate and Malpensa, held an eight-hour strike to coincide with the Alitalia strike.

Rail workers in Belgium strike over plans to break up the national railway structure

Rail workers in Belgium took strike action in the cities of Liege and Mons on April 11 in an unofficial strike over plans by the Belgian national railways

(SNCB/NMBS) to be split into four parts. The previous day the CEO of SNCB/NMBS Karel Vinck, announced plans that would pave the way for its international travel and goods transport sectors to be privatised.

It is expected that rail workers will hold further strike action by the end of April to oppose the plans. Employees fear the privatisation measures will result in threats to job security.

Rail unions said that they opposed the plans and the fact that they were not consulted prior to the announcement.

Fire Brigades Union delegates in England vote to reject latest pay offer

Delegates to a Fire Brigades Union conference in Brighton, England voted for a resolution rejecting the latest pay offer from their employers in the long running firefighters' dispute. The offer had also been recommended by the union executive. Firefighters originally began their campaign of industrial action on the basis of a demand to increase their pay to a basic of £30,000 a year. A fully qualified firefighter is currently paid £21,531 with starting pay below £17,000.

The 250 delegates representing the country's 59 fire brigades rejected the 16 percent pay rise over three years linked to far reaching changes in working practises and conditions. At the same conference held on April 15, the delegates also voted against taking any strike action during the current war in Iraq.

The conference discussed 24 emergency resolutions during the course of the conference. Among these was a vote to accept the proposals made by Professor Frank Burchill, the chairman of the fire service's negotiating body. The FBU said it accepted the proposals as they were a move towards "agreed change rather than imposed change. This opens a door. We will be pursuing the Burchill proposals in the hope of discussing them and turning them into a revised offer."

Public health doctors in Ireland strike over pay and conditions

Some 300 public health doctors in Ireland began indefinite strike action on April 14 to demand better pay and conditions. The workers are the only medically qualified doctors whose expertise is in the prevention of disease such as SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), hepatitis and meningitis.

On the first day of the strike doctors picketed regional health board offices and the National Disease Surveillance Centre in Dublin. For the duration of the action they plan to only provide emergency cover from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. during weekdays.

A spokesman for the Irish Medical Organisation said, “There is a major effort going on now worldwide about SARS, and HIV is another example. Hepatitis, meningitis, measles are also covered—so there is a whole range of infections that are managed by public health doctors at lots of levels. We have been doing that work from nine to five. We have been doing it out of hours on a voluntary basis for nine years because the government has not put in place a funded system. At this time there are no plans for trade unions representing the strikers to hold talks with health employers.

Social workers in the north of Ireland strike to demand pay increase

Social workers in Northern Ireland began a 48-hour stoppage on April 16 over pay. The action involved 1,600 members of the public service union, NIPSA who are employed by 11 Community Health Trusts.

The aim of the strike is to demand that the gap is closed between social workers and other health professionals. Following the strike an overtime ban will be implemented by the social workers from April 23.

NIPSA Deputy General Secretary Brian Campfield said of the dispute that the starting salary of £17,000 for a qualified social worker was not high enough to attract people into the profession, resulting in increased workloads for those who remain. He criticised the Department of Health for not taking the workers’ claims seriously stating, “Although this claim was submitted in February 2002 it was only when the union decided to ballot its members on industrial action that the employers entered into serious negotiations. Unfortunately the employers’ eleventh hour engagement has been insufficient to resolve this dispute.”

Namibian transport workers to strike over low

pay

Nearly 1,800 Namibian transport workers are set to take strike action to demand an increase in wages. The workers at TransNamib, who are members of the Namibia Transport and Allied Workers Union (Natau), are demanding raises of 19 percent for those earning \$N750 (\$US98) per month, and 14 percent for those earning between \$N4,000 and \$N4,800 (between \$US524 and \$US629).

The vote for a strike was carried by a big majority but TransNamib management are trying to use the fact that some of those who voted were not union members as an excuse to declare the vote invalid and to label the strike as illegal. TransNamib’s CEO, John Shaetonhodi, a former trade union leader, has threatened to dismiss workers who take strike action.

The strike is due to start on Wednesday April 23. Workers are angry that they are having to pay a 200 percent increase in medical aid payments, that TransNamib refuses to offer any increase in their transport allowances, and that Shaetonhodi’s car allowance is 45 times as much as their own.

Kenyan hospital workers strike to demand pay arrears

More than 600 hospital workers at the Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) in Nairobi, Kenya went out on strike on April 10, to demand immediate payment of their dues and allowances, which they say have been withheld by the hospital administration. The strikers said they would only return to work if the issue was addressed by the Health Minister.

South African teachers strike to oppose job cuts

Over 2,000 teachers in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, took part in a one-day strike to oppose swinging job cuts, and late deliveries of school materials. The teachers, members of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), have been angered by the provincial education department saying that there were only 65,000 teachers’ posts, implying that 3,000 were to lose their jobs.



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