

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

12 May 2003

General strike in Austria

Workers in Austria held a general strike for the first time in 50 years on May 6. The strike was called by the National Federation of Austrian Unions (OeGB) to protest pension reforms planned by the right-wing governing coalition. The industrial action was called following a breakdown in talks between the government and the unions in April.

The OeGB said that 1 million of its 1.4 million members participated in the action.

The strike affected a number of industries, train, tram and bus services, postal services and freight. The major cities and towns such as Vienna, Graz, Salzburg, Innsbruck and Linz were heavily affected by the stoppage.

Transport workers blockaded the country's main roads with pickets and closed three border crossings with Hungary—at Nickelsdorf, Klingenbach and Deutschkreuz.

The strike was condemned by Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel, who denounced the strike as “political” and said, “Laws are made in parliament and not decided through a demonstration of power in the streets.”

The government is planning to extend the period of pension contributions from 40 years to 45 years and to cut welfare benefits. The plans include increasing the retirement age to 65 and to cut some pension payments by more than 30 percent. It expects to legislate on the pension bill on June 6.

Most Austrian men currently retire at 59 and women at 57. The government estimates that the cuts will lead to savings of 2.2 billion euros (\$2.4 billion) over the next four years.

German workers strike to demand cut in hours for workers in east

On May 6, members of the IG Metall trade union walked off the job at several factories and plants in Germany in a campaign for a shorter working week in the eastern part of the country. Many workers in the east of Germany work a 38-hour week or more.

The workers struck automaker Daimler Chrysler's plant at Ludwigsfelde, south Berlin and railcar manufacturer Bombardier at Goerlitz and Bautzen in Saxony. The Fujitsu-Siemens factory at Soemmerda was also struck. The action involved some 4,000 workers who in the main held strikes for a short duration, some for as little as an hour.

The employers association Gesamtmetall has opposed calls to equalise the hours worked in western and eastern Germany. Martin Kannegiesser, head of the organisation, said last week,

“We can't consciously agree to a demand that would mean a long-term setback for an industry's process of recovery.”

French teachers continue to oppose government pension and education cuts

Teachers in France struck for the fourth time since the start of the academic year on May 6.

It was estimated that 50 percent of teachers participated in the latest strikes in protest at cuts in the 2003 budget for education, pension reform and the decentralisation of parts of the education system. The strike movement began in single schools in the region of Ile-de-France at the end of the Easter holidays.

The General Confederation of Labour and four other unions with members in education called the strike. Demonstrations were held all over France. In Marseille 10,000 to 15,000 participated, while in Toulouse some 7,000 took part.

The government plans to move some of the administrative functions it carries out in education to regional authorities. This includes 100,000 maintenance, technical and medical posts.

The government has stated that it intends for workers to pay into a new reformed pension scheme for a longer period. This would result in workers having to contribute for 40 years to qualify for a full pension—an extra two-and-a-half years. Education Minister Luc Ferry stated this week that the strikes would not prevent the government introducing the planned legislation.

A further day of protests and strikes involving teachers and other public sector workers is planned for May 13.

Bank workers in France strike to oppose job losses and branch closures

On May 5 workers at the Bank of France held a strike and national demonstration in Paris. The workers are members of several unions, including the General Confederation of Labour, the French Democratic Confederation of Labour and Workers Power

On April 28 management announced a staff reduction of some 3,000 of the 14,000 current employees as well as the closure of 100 branches all over France over the next three years.

Turkish workers protest labour draft bill

On May 7, Revolutionary Confederation of Labour Unions (DISK) members protested the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the labour draft bill. Workers, who gathered in front of AKP buildings, wanted the draft bill withdrawn from parliament. During the protest in Istanbul, workers shouted

slogans such as “No slavery law” and “Government take your law”.

DISK Province Director Ali Canci, who made a speech on behalf of the group, claimed that the law would make workers slaves. He said, “With the labour law amendments, it won’t be possible for workers to be promoted by seniority, recover damages, be insured, go on vacation and get overtime premiums. We are determined to struggle against making slavery legal. We demand the draft bill to be withdrawn and our warnings to be considered.”

Turkish Airlines collective bargaining negotiations collapsed

On May 8, chanting slogans and carrying placards, members of the Turkish Civil Aviation Union (Hava-Is) staged a demonstration in Istanbul, in front of the Turkish Airlines (THY) headquarters to protest the unwillingness of THY management to come to an agreement about the ongoing collective bargaining negotiations and the labour draft bill. After the sixth round of talks collapsed, some 700 union members assembled in front of the THY headquarters, chanting slogans against the management’s attitude such as: “We are workers, we are in the right, we will win”, “No job, no bread, no peace” and “No slavery law”. On May 13, THY workers will stage a mass demonstration in front of THY headquarters.

Nigerian university strike continues

In spite of recent negotiations between the Nigerian government and the unions representing both lecturers and other staff at the country’s universities, a four-month-old strike will continue.

The meeting between the federal government and the Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), Non-academic Staff Union (NASU) and Association of University Technologists of Nigeria (ASUTON) failed to reach an agreement.

The non-academic strike is over a salary claim. The unions are demanding a 30.5 percent agreement be implemented with no differential between them and academic staff. They say there must be one salary structure to cover both the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and their own unions.

NASU President Ivor Tarker denounced the government, the Ministry of Education and the National Universities Commission (NUC) for reintroducing disparity to the universities. “The meeting has not discussed anything new; the issue of disparity is the fundamental issue at stake and that issue has not been addressed,” Tarker said.

The strike that began at the beginning of this year by academic staff in ASUU is also continuing. Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo has personally intervened in the dispute, saying he would not reverse the Council of the University of Ilorin’s decision to sack 44 union members that began the dispute. All he proposed was that they could take up appointments in other universities. He said the government would not agree to the ASUU demands for university finance,

claiming that the amount of funding the union is demanding is half Nigeria’s total public expenditure.

The national president of the ASUU, Dr. Dipo Fashina, rejected Obasanjo’s repetition of employers’ claims that the 44 lecturers of the University of Ilorin were sacked because they disrupted the examination process at the university. He said he had expected Obasanjo “to have verified the claim by asking certain questions.... These lecturers were not given a fair trial and I am worried about this country. I am worried about the view the president presented because these lecturers were framed up.”

South Africa: New labour laws mean domestic workers sacked

Hundreds of domestic workers are complaining to South Africa’s Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) that they have been unfairly dismissed. New labour regulations mean that domestic workers must be paid a minimum monthly wage of R800 (\$110) and that employers must register them with the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF).

Assistant general-secretary for the Domestic Workers’ Union, Yunus Dhladhla, said that many more workers than before were registering complaints of unfair dismissals and unfair working conditions than before. Dhladhla said, “Many are also complaining that their employers want to reduce their salaries to R800, in cases where the wage is higher. We point out to them that this is unfair labour practice.”

The law governing UIF contributions requires all those who employ domestic workers for 24 hours or more a month to register them with the unemployment fund and pay in 1 percent out of the employee’s salary and an extra 1 percent from the employer.

Nersan Govender, head of operations and information for the CCMA, confirmed the increase in cases brought by domestic workers: “Many are being dismissed because their employers say they can no longer afford to pay them, and that the UIF registration process is too much of a burden,” Govender said.

By last week 320,000 people had registered, but South Africa’s Department of Labour estimates that about 800,000 are employed as domestic workers.



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