

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

23 May 2003

French workers continue national protests against pension reforms

On May 19 six unions including the General Confederation of Labour, Force Ouvrière, UNSA and the FSU (the largest union of the public services, representing 2.2 million servants) began a week of strikes and protests at the government's plans to reform the pension system.

The pension reform plan includes making employees contribute for longer before they can claim a full pension. The French Democratic Confederation of Labour trade union refused to participate.

Demonstrations in Paris and 70 other towns marked the start of the protest week. In Paris many teachers took part and were joined by civil servants, hospital employees, workers of the Bank of France, of the ANPE (employment exchange), postal workers at La Poste, staff at France Telecom, the rail network SNCF and RATP metro. Schools were among the most affected by the strike with half the country's primary and nursery teachers and 40 percent of other teachers joining the protests.

Some 800,000 people throughout the country demonstrated. Trade unions estimated that 100,000 protesters were present in Paris.

At Marseille the demonstration was as large as in Paris. Slogans calling for a "general strike" and the continuation of the movement were prevalent.

On May 25 a joint national demonstration of private and public sector workers is to be held. The CFTC trade union stated that it accepted the installation of a "working group" for further discussion about the pension system with the government and therefore will not take part.

School and college strike continues in France

At the end of last week staff at 2,500 schools (colleges and lycées) were striking. One thousand of them had already been on strike against job reductions, decentralisation and privatisation projects and pension reforms for weeks before the day-of-action on May 13. The SNUipp-FSU (primary school level trade union) estimated 75 percent participation in the action.

At Toulouse the examinations at four lycées did not take place. The Toulouse workers were striking unofficially in defiance of the local union's recommendations and threats by the government.

On May 19, several unions in the education sector called on their members to participate in a national day of protest yesterday, May 22.

Metro and tramway workers strike over pay in Marseille

Metro and tramways workers took strike action in Marseille on May 19 in a dispute over pay. The strike was called by the French Democratic Confederation of Labour against the Marseille public traffic authority.

EC civil servants protest against pension reform

On May 20 civil servants employed by the European Commission in Brussels held a one-day strike to oppose plans to cut spending on the pension fund. Workers set up pickets outside Commission buildings. The action follows a similar stoppage in April.

Earlier this week European Commission Vice-President Neil Kinnock announced that the Commission had agreed with European Union member states that the retirement age for EU civil servants should rise from 60 to 63. The contribution period after which a retiring official can claim the maximum payout of 70 percent of his or her salary would also rise by

nearly two years. It currently stands at 35 years.

Kinnock reported that the changes would save one billion euros (\$1.16bn or £712,000) over 15 years from May 2004. Unions representing members at the EU said that it was a "frontal attack on every aspect of the pension conditions" and have warned that further stoppages will be held if the plans are ratified in the European Parliament.

Scottish nursery staff strike

On May 20, 2,500 nursery nurses at council-run nurseries in the west of Scotland began three one-day strikes to demand a 35-hour working week and a new pay deal in a long-running dispute.

The first day of the stoppage saw staff walk off the job in 13 local authority areas including Ayrshire, Inverclyde, Dumfries and Galloway, Glasgow, Renfrewshire, Dunbartonshire, North Lanarkshire, and Shetland and Orkney. At Glasgow City Council, 120 nurseries were affected by the strike action.

Shortly after this, the strike spread to all of Scotland's local authorities and involved some 5,000 staff. The nursery nurses are campaigning for a £4,000-a-year pay rise.

Six weeks of industrial action was announced by the public services sector union Unison. In total around 400 council-run nurseries are expected to be hit by strike action. A boycott of extra duties will also be implemented.

There are some 7,500 nursery nurses working in Scotland's council-run nursery schools, day nurseries and special schools. Following a two-year childcare course in order to qualify to be a nursery nurse, starting salaries are just £10,000. This rises to just £13,800 a year at the top of the pay scale. There has been no review of nursery pay for 15 years.

Czech pilots set to step up industrial action

Pilots employed by Czech Airlines' (CSA) have threatened to escalate their work "go slow" into a full strike if negotiations over a new pay deal with management fail over the next two weeks.

Last week representatives of the 360 pilots who have been working to rule decided to escalate the action. Many flights have been delayed by the limited action so far. Josef Kraus, executive board member in the Czech Airline Pilot Association (CZALPA), said, "At the moment, our loyalty to the company is zero. We have the pilots' mandate to resolve the situation in any which way, including a strike."

This follows three months of failed negotiations and two weeks of the pilots' go-slow. The main disagreement in the negotiations is that management are demanding that a collective deal is signed covering all CSA employees. The pilots union is calling for a specific and separate agreement.

Separate agreements with the pilots have been signed over the last five years. The last deal signed by the parties expired on March 13.

Turkey: Mass demonstration in Ankara

In the midst of a debate on the government's new labour bill, the Confederation of Turkish Labour Unions (Turk-Is) threatened to call a general strike in a huge rally attended by tens of thousands of workers on Saturday May 17 in the capital Ankara.

The demonstration was held under the title of “Claim to be the owner of your job, your bread, your country” and some 100,000 attended. Turk-Is chairman Salih Kilic addressing the crowd warned the government to take the demands of the workers seriously.

Apart from the labour bill, the workers also protested the attitude of public sector management with regard to collective bargaining negotiations, which have failed to reach agreement.

The Ankara demonstration was planned as a part of a series of nationwide protests.

Iraqi oil workers protest in Basra

On May 9, workers at the Basra Oil Refinery—the country’s second largest—demanded elections to choose managers of their own choice. Faced with possible delays in the revival of oil output, Major Mark Tilley of the British Army and de facto chief executive of Iraq’s South Refineries Company replied, “I’ve got a refinery to run and I can’t change the management now.”

Tilley was speaking from the offices of former manager and Ba’ath Party official Ibrahim Kazim Mazayid. The Major, with United States backing, had dismissed Mazayid and his deputies and replaced them with less senior managers who were also members of the Ba’ath Party.

In response around 300 workers, roughly 10 percent of the pre-war staff, demonstrated to show their dissatisfaction. Placards read, “We want liberal elections” and “We don’t want another Saddam.”

“This is our country and we should be free to choose our managers now that Saddam is gone,” said Mehdi Saleh Maatouq, the chief engineer at the Basra refinery.

Basra’s UK military commander, Brigadier Graham Binns, plans to start registering personnel to guard oil sites and other infrastructure. The guards will supplement about 1,000 police officers in the city and be issued weapons. In an ominous statement regarding their purpose Binns said, “Unfortunately, people here only understand the law of the gun.”

Iraqi health workers protest appointment in Baghdad

Hundreds of medical staff demonstrated in Baghdad on May 9, demanding the removal of former Ba’ath Party officials from the interim Iraqi Health Ministry. They also called for wage raises and for the right to form a union.

Demonstrators from 16 Baghdad-area hospitals, most wearing their medical white coats, marched from Ibn-Alnafeez hospital to the Palestine Hotel which houses most foreign journalists chanting, “Change the health system,” and “Change the self-financed system.”

Doctor Adel Eswet, a cardiac surgeon who helped organise the demonstration said; “With this change in the country, we have the chance to give our ideas in a new democratic way. So we’re starting in a nice, quiet democratic way.”

Most of the health workers have not been paid in two months. Many live without electricity and work in deplorable conditions. Compounding the difficulties faced by medical staff is the fact that many hospitals and government warehouses were allowed to be looted by the occupation force in the wake of the US military occupation.

Another major demand of the protesters was the call for the removal of Dr Ali Schnan, also known as Ali Janaabi, from the post of interim health minister. Protesters accuse him of being a former Ba’ath Party loyalist. Schnan was chosen for the position under the Office of Rehabilitation and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA).

Dr. Ahad Al-Ali, an ophthalmologist said, “We can’t see the desired improvement. We see the same old administrations and executives holding their old titles. That alone is reason enough to demonstrate.”

Steve Browning, ORHA’s senior adviser to the interim Iraqi Health Ministry, showed up at the demonstration and sought to ingratiate himself with the protest by praising the doctors. “An important part of our democratic process is that your concerns be addressed to me,” he said.

Nigerian textile workers strike against job cuts

Workers at the Mortit Textile factory in Kano, Nigeria have gone on strike in protest against the sacking of 95 workers.

Ali Munnir Matawalle, state chairman of the Nigerian Labour Congress, told a mass meeting of strikers at the factory gate, that after working at the factory for up to 30 years they were sacked without receiving any benefits. He said the company’s actions were unjustifiable and the factory would remain closed until the sacked workers had got justice. However, he called on the strikers to “exercise patience”, making it clear to them that the union would accept either reinstatement or the payment of benefits due

All deliveries of fuel to the site have been blocked until the issue is settled.

Nigerian civil servants strike

On May 15, civil servants in Oyo State, Nigeria, took indefinite strike action to demand payment of three years leave allowances and pension arrears for retired colleagues. The strikers took to the streets early that day causing traffic delays as they blocked all the entrances to the state secretariat preventing the outgoing governor, Alhaji Lam Adesina and other bureaucrats, from gaining access.

The Nigerian Labour Council had called on Adesina “to ensure payment of the leave allowance before the expiration of his administration on May 29th, 2003”. They claim that despite giving several assurances that the outstanding leave bonuses and pension arrears would be paid, Adesina has refused to settle their grievances.

The Oyo State civil servants held an emergency conference two days before the strike at which they resolved to commence the strike until the outgoing administration “is ready to pay our leave allowance of three years”.

Secretary to the state government, Chief Michael Koleoso, has condemned the strike and called on “the security apparatus in the state to be alive to their responsibilities and not give an impression of being used as a result of glaring complacency.

“Obviously, the ongoing strike has a political undertone, designed to frustrate and embarrass this administration out of office,” the statement further declared.

The strike has been supported by thousands of school students who demonstrated through the state capital on May 16 in solidarity with their striking teachers and parents. They marched to the state government secretariat chanting slogans condemning the administration’s attitude to the dispute.

According to *This Day* (Lagos), the Commissioner of Police for Oyo State, Mr. Kevin Opoke, has addressed the strikers warning them “not to allow hoodlums to hijack the demonstration so as not to send wrong signals to the society”.

Strike at Nigerian universities continues

Nigerian university pro-chancellors (CPC) have threatened to take action to reopen universities if the unions fail to call off the strike. Twelve federal universities out of the 24 currently affected by the industrial action have already been opened. The nation-wide strike involves members of the Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU), the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), ASUTON and particularly the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU).

The unions condemn the federal government for deliberately causing the crises in the universities. NASU branch chairman, University of Jos branch, Comrade Jonathan Tace accused it of attempting to weaken the unity of the strikers by approving a salary and housing allowances for ASUU, separate from other university workers, discriminatory application of 65 years as the approved compulsory retirement age for staff and refusing to honour the agreement signed by the unions and the federal government in 2001. He called on the federal government to stop “the divide and rule strategy it has adopted in paying the salaries of some university workers while depriving others of their legitimate rights and face the real issues that brought about this strike.”

General-secretary of NASU, Mr. Peter Adeyemi has insisted that the NASU will continue with the strike until the agreement reached with the federal government is implemented. He criticised the government for calling a separate meeting of ASUU, NASU and SSANU, (Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities), noting that the universities cannot survive without all of them.

Zimbabwean teachers defy a government return to work order

Teachers in Zimbabwe, who have been on strike since May 8, are continuing their action despite a decision by the Labour Court that the strike is illegal. The court ordered the teachers to return to work within 48 hours. The president of the Labour Court, Justice Energy Chinembiri Bhunu, has called for the dispute to be referred to the National Joint Negotiating Council for determination within 21 days.

The national executive of the Zimbabwe Teachers' Association (ZIMTA) has urged the strikers to comply with the court ruling. It declared, "Taking into account the time frame given to the employer to resolve the teachers' grievances and in the spirit of abiding by the law, the ZIMTA national executive encourages its members to go back to work as directed."

However the vast majority of ZIMTA members remain on strike, and those who are going into school are refusing to teach lessons. The strike is in support of a demand for higher salaries to meet the escalating cost of living in Zimbabwe. The teachers are calling on the Public Service Commission (PSC), which employs all civil servants, to review their salaries upwards.

On the day the court ruling was announced, 34 female teachers were arrested in Harare. They are affiliated to the Progressive Teachers' Union of Association (PTUZ), and had marched with other colleagues to the head office of the Ministry of Education to demand an audience with the minister of education to protest against the "unilateral transfer" of female teachers from areas where they taught and stayed with their husbands.

After their arrest the women were detained for five hours at Harare Central Police Station before being released after paying fines of \$3,000 each.



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