

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

16 May 2003

## **French workers hold national day of action to protest government pension plans**

On May 13, over 1.5 million people took part in strikes and demonstrations against pension reform in 40 French cities and towns.

In Paris 250,000 people demonstrated including public services employees, workers from Renault, Thales, Danone, Air France, and Alstom. Slogans included “Pensions before death!” and “Tomorrow: indefinite general strike in the public and private sector”.

In Marseille 200,000 demonstrated, at Toulouse 100,000, Grenoble 50,000, Lyon 40,000, Clermont-Ferrand 40,000 Bordeaux 34,000, Strasbourg 15,000, Toulon 35,000 and Nice 30,000.

In some 80 towns strikes by public transport workers were held and in 14 public traffic came to a standstill. It is estimated that the nearly 60 percent of the national rail network SNCF took industrial action.

In Paris 90 to 96 percent of the métro, bus and RER conductors were on strike and 80 percent of the civil air traffic was halted.

The Ministry of Education estimated that strike rates in schools were at 74.18 percent, in colleges 64.20 percent and Lycées professionals 65 percent. More than 55 percent of the non-teaching employees participated in the strike. The unions said that more than 80 percent of the total staff took part.

Public hospital workers took part in the protest with the strike rate reaching 90 percent. The managements of the postal service La Poste and the telecommunications company France Télécom said that 57 and 47.6 percent of their staff respectively were on strike by midday.

Many national daily newspapers and some of the regional newspapers did not appear at the kiosks and the TV and radio programmes were hit by the strike.

On May 14 the social minister Francois Fillon continued his discussions with the unions. The French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) and the CFE-CGC said that the negotiations will possibly improve the pensions legislation. Other unions have demanded their revocation

and the beginning of new negotiations.

On the same day the employees of the Paris métro and the RER voted massively in a general assembly to continue the strike. The Stalinist-led CGT announced that further strikes will be held in June.

## **Bulgarian hospital staff strike**

Bulgarian Hospital Staff took strike action this week to protest against unpaid wages. Staff in hospitals in Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest city, were treating only emergency cases on May 12 and 13 as more than 1,000 workers marched to call for the resignation of the health and finance ministers. Wages for hospital staff in the city have not been paid for two months and workers are also opposed to growing hospital debts and decisions to cut hospital budgets. The Bulgarian Doctors' Union said the demonstrations were in opposition to the “drastic” hospital budget cuts across the country.

The strike ended on May 14 following an agreement by the government and local authorities that the wages would be paid.

The debt for hospitals in the Plovdiv municipality is at 2.5 million leva (\$US1.47 million), with some hospitals claiming that their budgets have been cut by almost \$2 million.

One doctor at the Plovdiv Lung Diseases Hospital, Georgi Blagoev, warned that further strikes will occur if the crisis was not tackled by the government. He said, “I guarantee that there will be similar protests again if nothing is done about this at the Ministries of Health and Finance. We can treat patients only because I have managed to convince some of the companies whose services we use to keep supplying us.”

The hospital, has reported debts of 600,000 leva (around \$350,000).

## **DHL postal staff strike in Belgium**

On May 13, staff at the parcel delivery service DHL took strike action in three of its Flemish offices, with 370 workers picketing the Ternat office in Limburg province.

Employees at DHL's St-Katelijne-Waver, Ternat and Opglabbeek offices all stopped work in protest against a

proposed merger of operations. The parent company of DHL, Deutsche Post, is planning a merger of its operations in Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Staff fear that such a merger will result in job losses and are demanding guarantees from the company to the contrary.

#### **Union federation in Turkey announces demonstrations**

The Confederation of Turkish Labour Unions (Turk-Is) has called on its members to demonstrate in the capital Ankara on May 17 in protest of a newly proposed labour bill, privatisations, compulsory retirement practices, unpaid bonuses and low wages in the public sector.

At present unions are in negotiations with public sector management over a wage claim for 350,000 workers and have failed to reach agreement.

The demonstration is to be held under the title of “Claim to be the owner of your job, your bread, your country” and up to 100,000 are expected to attend.

On March 12 Turk-Is issued a statement saying, “The working class will show its power in the most comprehensive fashion against any attempt to pass a labour bill that is not approved by Turk-Is.”

#### **Footwear workers strike in South Africa**

Almost 10,000 footwear workers in South Africa have begun a nationwide strike to demand improvements in their bargaining rights, as well as their wages and conditions. The workers are members of the National Union of Leather and Allied Workers (NULAW). The union has put forward a request for a 15 percent pay increase, while making it clear that it is willing to negotiate over the figure so long as this is not linked to changes in the current bargaining council agreement.

The union insists that wage talks and renegotiation of the bargaining council agreement should be dealt with separately and that the current bargaining council agreement be extended by 12 months for the entire industry while a simpler version is being worked out.

The Southern African Footwear and Leather Industries Association (SAFLIA) has put forward an eight percent wage increase and a two percent provident fund increase, but has made this conditional on not extending the current agreement beyond the end of June and renegotiating the entire agreement within six months.

Employers who are not members of SAFLIA (around 30 percent of the total) would not be bound by its terms in the meantime. NULAW general secretary, Martin Paulsen, warned that employers could then leave SAFLIA so as to avoid paying the increase. “The bargaining council is once again at risk of collapsing, which would mean no more provident or sick fund for workers,” he said.

#### **Public sector strike in Kwara State, Nigeria**

Public sector workers have begun indefinite strike action

in Kwara State, Nigeria. The strike includes primary and secondary school teachers as well as local government staff. After a meeting called by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) of all categories of public sector workers in the state capital Ilorin, unions called for the strike: “having realised that the Kwara State government of Mohammed Lawal is not willing to settle, among other things, April 2003 salaries to all workers, non-payment of April 2003 pension allowances to pensioners, and non-implementation of circular on restored salary steps for primary school teachers.”

#### **Worker shot dead in Mozambique**

A worker was killed and 21 others were injured when police opened fire on strikers at the natural gas processing centre under construction at Temane, in the southern province of Mozambique. According to Radio Mozambique, the workers were protesting at the sacking of 12 of their colleagues without prior notice—although the company spokeswomen claimed the dispute was over a “completion bonus” to be paid to the workers at the end of their contracts.

The workers are engaged in building work for the joint South African and Italian Group Five/CMC consortium that is contracted to the South African petro-chemical company Sasol, which has the rights to Mozambique’s Temane and Pande gas fields.

#### **Teachers’ strike goes ahead in Zimbabwe**

The strike called by the Zimbabwe Teachers’ Association (ZIMTA) for a pay rise is reported to have had a patchy beginning. Opposition newspapers reported ZIMTA officials saying that the strike decision was made during school holidays and it would take a while to be communicated to all members. Teachers were reporting for duty, but then not conducting lessons. The state-run *Herald* newspaper reports that Secretary for Education and Culture Dr Thompson Tsodzo claimed that only six schools in Harare were on strike.

In April the Zimbabwe government agreed that teachers’ salaries were lower than those of other public sector employees and the teachers are demanding that the government implements a job evaluation exercise that would increase their pay, which has been hit by runaway inflation.



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