

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

13 June 2003

Strikes and demonstrations against pension reform continue in France

Tens of thousands of workers throughout France continued strikes and demonstrations during the last week to protest the government's planned changes to the pensions system.

The strikes were held leading up to, during and after the debate on pension reforms in the French Parliament on June 10. Under the proposals the right-wing government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin plans to phase in an increase in the number of years people have to work before being eligible for full retirement benefits to 41 by 2012 and to 42 by 2020.

On June 3 in Toulouse 400 protesters, including teachers, public servants, students and other workers, blocked the most important routes to the city. A similar action was held in Figeac. At Angoulême and Poitiers six TVG trains on route to Paris were blocked by demonstrators.

On June 5, transport workers in various towns and cities took strike action. In Paris demonstrators blocked the rails at the Gare de Lyon station, stopping all traffic in the early afternoon until police forces intervened. Railway workers occupied the control centre of Brétigny-sur-Orge in the Ile-de-France region, causing the blockade of the circulation of the C line of the RER. Buses were also prevented from leaving the depots. The same day public transport workers of Marseille decided to continue industrial action.

Workers at La Poste, the French postal service, continued their protest last week when they occupied the offices of La Poste at Bayonne, Biarritz and Saint-Jean-de Luz on June 5.

On June 7, two thirds of the traffic of the TVG rail service, the Corails and the TERs was disrupted while half of the metro system was still affected by the strike in Paris.

On June 9, only one third of regional trains were operational throughout the country. In the cities and surrounding areas of Marseille, Montpellier, Tours, the north of Paris region and Toulouse just a quarter ran.

On June 10, only a third of rail services were running nationwide and public transport was heavily affected in a number of cities including, Paris and France's second largest city, Marseille. The city experienced strikes with no metro or trams running and only eight percent of buses operating. In Bordeaux 30 percent of buses were in operation and a refuse workers strike entered its eighth day.

The following day some subway and train lines returned to normal in Paris while others suffered delays and partial service.

Teachers also struck nationally for the eleventh time since the start of the school year. The SNES-FSU teachers union stated that it would continue to strike. General Secretary Denis Paget said, "The strike will continue because the government has not moved enough."

In Bordeaux no buses ran on June 11 as the strike of refuse workers continued. The mayor of the city declared an emergency over the piles of garbage that remain in the streets.

In Paris police were mobilised to prevent protesters from entering the National Assembly during the debate on pension changes. They used tear gas and water cannons in an attempt to disperse the protesters.

Transport workers held industrial action that hit the metro service, the RER and local bus services. In total some 40 towns were affected by the strikes of transport workers.

A number of flights scheduled by Air France were cancelled due to a strike by the air traffic controllers' unions. This followed a strike held on June 3 that led to the cancellation of 70 percent of flights in and out of France.

A strike by French energy workers resulted in a cut of power production by 5,500 megawatts, or about five percent of total generation capacity. The workers are members of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) trade union.

A CGT union spokesman said, "There are plans to continue the strike and cuts tomorrow and for several weeks or months. We have put in place an (industrial) action that could go on for some time".

A CSA public opinion poll published in the *La Figaro* newspaper found that 66 percent of the French population sympathise with or actively support the strikes to protest the changes to the pension system.

French museum staff strikes to demand parity

On June 5, four unions including the General Confederation of Labour and Force Ouvrière called an indefinite strike of their members to oppose proposals by Minister of Culture Jean-Jaques Aillagon.

The minister is proposing a project of budgetary autonomy and reductions of subsidies for the largest 32 national museums. The union has called for solidarity between "rich" and "less rich" museums and estimates that the plans could threaten the jobs of 1300 employees.

Education workers on islands of Martinique and La Reunion strike

Education staff on the French protectorate of Martinique decided to continue their strike against decentralisation and pension changes. The strike involving 400 teachers was held from June 9-13 during the baccalaureate university entrance exams. A demonstration was also held on June 12 at Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique.

On June 5, police on the French-controlled island of La Reunion in the Indian Ocean broke up a six-week strike of education staff. The police were mobilised by the prefect of the island. As a result of the police actions, which included the use of tear gas, several hundreds strikers tried to resist and there were violent incidents.

Strikes in Austria against pension reform

A national strike against planned pension reforms shut down public transportation across Austria last week.

Also joining the nationwide strikes were teachers and workers from the postal services, law enforcement and customs, government services, hotel industry and garbage collection. The stoppages have been described as the largest strike action in Austria since World War II. The strikes coincide with similar European protests over pension reform, notably in France.

Federation of Austrian Unions (OeGB) leader Fritz Verzetnitsch said it was a "clear sign to politicians—think about what you are doing."

Unions and the opposition political parties want to renegotiate a plan by Conservative Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel's government to cut pension payments by about 11 percent and raise the retirement age.

Airport workers blocked a road leading to Vienna's international airport.

An opinion poll last week showed there is widespread sympathy for the strikes. Law student Martina Weginger, 19, said: "It was necessary to give a signal and that is why I salute the strikes."

Helmut Kramer from Vienna's Economic Research Institute (Wifo) think tank said on ORF state television that he thought the strike could cost Austria some 20-30 million euros (\$23 to \$35 million).

Bernhard Felderer, from the IHS think tank, said that while this was "not a lot of money" the real damage could be the negative signals being sent to foreign investors about Austria, which had managed through "consensus" to avoid major strikes in the post-war era.

The strike follows two previous walkouts. On May 6, 500,000 people came out in protest, Austria's first nationwide strike in over 50 years, while 200,000 workers downed tools on May 13.

Talks between the conservative government, political parties, unions and business leaders broke down at the beginning of last week.

The proposed reforms would raise workers' contributions period from 40 to 45 years and gradually phase out early retirement schemes traditionally considered by many Austrians as an automatic right.

The government wants to save 2.2 billion euros (\$2.5 billion) over the next four years.

Greek metal miners protest against job insecurity

In northern Greece 120 miners have been conducting an underground protest for over a week to save a condemned metal-ore mine. Some have refused meals and several have been hospitalised.

The town of Stratoní and nearby villages in northern Greece have been gold and other precious metal mine sites since the time of Alexander the Great.

Stratoní lead and zinc mines were condemned recently after a nearby gold mine was closed on environmental grounds. The Canadian contract-holders, Kinross Gold Corp. of Toronto, are now pulling out.

The miners are angry with the government for failing to safeguard what had been one of the largest foreign investments in Greece.

For many they have become a symbol of Greece's growing job insecurity, amid factory closures and fears of cheaper labour emerging with the planned eastward expansion of the European Union (EU) next year.

Miner Ioakeim Stylianos said, "We have not been paid for five months. We've had to borrow money. What are we supposed to do?"

Development Minister Akis Tsochadzopoulos has said the government was trying to set up a "new structure" to take over the mines, while Kinross has over \$13.5 million aid for a transition. "[The protesters] should be certain we will have a positive result next week," Tsochadzopoulos said.

But miners and their families camped out at the Stratoní site are sceptical. "All we hear are promises," said Stylianos.

Unemployment, now around 10 percent, has become the country's main worry. Many fear competition will drive more out of work when the EU takes in eight countries from eastern Europe next year.

An underwear factory was shut down last month when its owners decided to move the facility to neighbouring EU-candidate Bulgaria.

Inhabitants of Stratoní, 120 kilometres southeast of the port of Thessaloníki, worry about the impact of mine closures in an area with few other employment alternatives. The workers, most from families with a long mining tradition, remain defiant and say even if a new operator is not found they will demand full compensation for the 500 currently employed.

"Our cemeteries are full of 30-year-olds who died because they were miners," Stylianos said. "We have health problems but we have survived. They should help us."

British bus strikes

Two areas of Britain were heavily affected by bus strikes this week.

In South Yorkshire 1,500 bus drivers struck over pay on June 7. Public

transportation in the city of Sheffield was paralysed by strike action at First Bus.

The Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), is staging six such days of action, which it said will bring much of public transport in Sheffield and the surrounding area to a halt. The union is campaigning for a starting pay rate of £5.36 an hour to be increased to £6, and said it should rise to £7 after two years.

National officer Graham Stevenson said, "Such low wages are an absolute disgrace in this day and age. Our people are doing a responsible job, every day conveying thousands of passengers in a major city."

The company said it had offered a pay rise worth 6.5 percent on the hourly rate for 1,100 drivers and 3.2 percent for 400 senior staff.

The drivers will stage a 72-hour strike later in the month.

Strike action also caused massive disruption in Bournemouth, southern England.

Around 260 drivers and engineers from the town's Yellow Buses firm refused to work last Friday in a dispute over pay and overtime. The workers, who are all members of the TGWU, rejected a pay offer of less than four percent.

The strike means all of the firm's 180 regular buses have been left at the depot. But a spokesperson for the firm said National Express Services to and from London would continue to run and the A1 service to Bournemouth Airport was unaffected.

The strike was the first of a series of planned weekly stoppages.

Iranian textile workers stage hunger strike over unpaid wages

Around 2,000 textile workers at a chintz-making factory in Behshahr in Mazandaran province in northern Iran have occupied the plant and gone on hunger strike. The workers, who have been on hunger strike since May 15, are demanding 27 months of unpaid wages.

The textile workers began their struggle in August 1998. On April 16 2003, close to 30,000 employees in Behshahr staged an angry protest and marched through the city. After an initial display of force and the imposition of a martial law, government officials started negotiations.

On May 6, two workers began a hunger strike and were followed by six more two days later. In less than 20 days, the hunger protest encompassed almost the entire workforce.

The company bosses, in collaboration with the government, then agreed to pay 4 billion rials (officially \$4,889,975). The workers rejected this and vowed to continue their hunger strike until 50 billion rials, the total amount outstanding, has been paid.

Government authorities, along with Behshahr's Governor, have since been attempting to intimidate the workers. The police and security forces have surrounded the factory.

According to a number of sources, the health of a number of strikers has been deteriorating and some have already been receiving medical treatments. Some of them have written wills, but all have vowed to continue their struggle until their demand for the immediate and unconditional payment of unpaid wages is met.

Workers in other parts of Iran facing similar practices of withheld wages have been organising protests and strike activities. More than one million people have had their wages withheld by employers and the government, which is Iran's largest employer. This has affected a large section of the society in terms of housing, health and access to food, clothing and other basic needs. Many workers have tried to cope by taking on other jobs, moving in with relatives, moving their families out of the towns and cities and so on.

Two years ago it was considered normal to have employees not paid for as long as 32 months. Today, with a deteriorating economic and political situation and no sign of any decrease in double-figure inflation, over a 100,000 workers have gone without pay for between three to 36 months.

Despite the fact that Iranian regime's labour law and practices does not allow the formation of independent labour organisations and trade unions,

and labour strikes are prohibited, struggles against these gross violations have been growing.

Histadrut protesters block traffic in Haifa, Israel

Workers belonging to the Histadrut labour federation and the Haifa unions snarled up rush hour traffic in and around Haifa on June 4 as part of their protest against the government's planned pension reforms.

Main junctions were blocked by thousands of demonstrators. There were also disruptions to public transport, with train traffic halted until 11 a.m. Local authority offices were closed to the public as were ministerial offices, while hospitals operated on a reduced holiday footing.

Demonstrators blocked roads around the university, the Paz bridge and southern approaches to the northern port city. They closed off part of Route 4, with police rerouting traffic to the Coastal Highway.

The head of the Histadrut's Haifa branch, Baruch Zaltz, and head of the labour federation's Haifa unions department, Yigal Cohen, said before the protests that it would not be possible "to enter or leave the city from the morning through to the afternoon. This will be like a military operation."

Zaltz added: "The government has wiped out the security of having a pension in Israel and has turned pensions from a secure saving to a high-risk investment on the stock market. We're not just flexing our muscles by closing down Haifa. The workers are hurting and angry with the Finance Ministry for cutting into their pensions and planning to use the funds as petty cash to cover the state's deficit."

Nigerian tanker drivers on strike

Tanker drivers at petroleum depots in the Edo and Delta states in Nigeria are on strike over the loading of fuel at the Warri Depot. Feelings have run high and the company, Pipelines and Products Marketing Company (PPMC), alleges that the strikers beat up one of their area managers last week.

Leaders of the petroleum drivers' branch of the National Union of Petroleum and National Gas Workers (NUPENG) have been suspended and the union secretary transferred.

The strike has caused a serious shortage of fuel in the area, resulting in a thriving black market and many commuters walking to work. Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) group manager Jackson Gaius-Obaseki has called on the strikers to return to work".

The NUPENG national leadership has supported this appeal. Alhaji Tijani, national president of the Petroleum Tanker Driver branch of the union, urged strikers to return to work, "in the interest of peace and a long standing business relationship." So far the strikers are refusing to comply. They insist that the suspended leaders must be reinstated before they return.

Tankers drivers had earlier threatened industrial action if the federal government did not check "sharp practices" in the allocation and distribution of petroleum products by some top executives of PPMC.

Iscor employs 1,500 strikebreakers in South Africa

Steel workers at Iscor, South Africa, have been on a nationwide strike since May 26 in support of their demand for back pay. The workers are members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and were claiming R5,000 (\$US638) per year, backdated for seven years, to compensate for a company restructuring exercise. They are also claiming salary increases in line with a new job grading system.

Iscor has hired a 1,500-strong strikebreaking force at its Vanderbijlpark plant and claims that so far it has not suffered production losses. NUMSA says the company has also called for support from the South African National Defence Force, South African Police Service and 400 private security officers to disrupt the strike.

On June 5, the company obtained a court order prohibiting NUMSA members from "intimidating non-striking workers at their plants". The NUMSA leadership has warned that this will "exacerbate tensions and increase the level of conflict." They have also warned about the danger of employing untrained labour to work in the furnace area. Nevertheless

NUMSA has pledged to abide by the court order. The trade union Solidarity urged its members to boycott the strikers' work. A spokesman warned that the union would withdraw its members if it could not guarantee their safety.

NUMSA has since reduced its claim to a one-off payment of R5,000, but the company has rejected it claiming the strikers have no legal justification to back pay.

South African miners strike

Four hundred South African miners have gone on strike at the Klipspringer Diamond Mine in Zebediela outside Polokwane in Limpopo. The strikers, members of the National Union of Mineworkers, are demanding a 20 percent wage increase. They are also claiming R700 per month housing allowance and full salary for annual holidays.

The strikers complain that the lowest paid workers earn as little as R1,600 per month. Management has rejected what they claim are impossible demands.



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