

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

20 June 2003

Firefighters' dispute ends in the UK

On June 12, the nine-month UK firefighters' dispute ended following a special union conference of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) in Glasgow. Delegates at the conference voted by a margin of three to one in favour of the agreement negotiated by the union and the fire service. Nearly 1,000 delegates from all 58 brigades attended.

The settlement had been agreed by the union executive in May. The deal will see the pay of a qualified firefighter increase by 11 percent by July 2004 to an average of £25,000 per annum. But the pay deal is conditional on changes in working practises that were agreed by both parties under the pretext of "modernising" the fire service.

The FBU had initially campaigned for a 40 percent increase in firefighters' pay to bring their wage to £30,000 per annum.

FBU leader Andy Gilchrist hailed the agreement and gave a 20-minute speech at the conference calling for its acceptance.

Many firefighters have expressed opposition to the deal on the basis of the changes that have been accepted. Gilchrist said that he was aware that some firefighters were "frustrated, angry and disappointed" at the deal, but used his own refusal to wage a political struggle against the Blair Labour government in favour of limited industrial action to proclaim the impossibility of victory.

"If anyone thinks we can overcome the state with a few periodic strikes then they are living on a different planet. If anyone thinks we can launch indefinite strike action and keep the members together they are coming from a different universe," he said.

A number of firefighters heckled Gilchrist upon his arrival at the conference. One stated that, "This is double talk and weasel words. It is a sell-out. It will lead to fire station closures and deaths."

Another said, "He has done everything to undermine our action. He has cancelled strikes and the deal on offer now is the same as one we have already rejected."

Scottish nursery nurses continue strike over pay and contract terms

Nursery nurses in Scotland continued their campaign of industrial action in a dispute over pay and contract terms as a further 2,000 took strike action on June 17. The staff began their campaign of industrial action on May 20.

The nursery employees are members of the Public sector union UNISON. The strike lasted 48 hours and involved workers in Falkirk, Stirling, Perth and Kinross, Dundee and Fife.

Nursery nurses are paid an average of £13,000 a year and are calling for a £4,000 a year pay increase.

As well as the stoppages, staff is also boycotting any additional work that they normally do beyond their contracted duties. One of the issues in the dispute is that there has been no review of nursery nurse responsibilities since the last pay review 15 years ago.

UNISON has announced that its national industrial action committee will meet later this regarding the dispute. On June 24 nursery nurses from all over Scotland will demonstrate in Glasgow.

Mobil Oil workers on strike in Nigeria

Employees of Mobil Oil Nigeria have been on strike since June 11 over their pensions and other benefits. The strikers belong to the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), who are in talks with Mobil management.

The workers have been locked out since June 13 and armed policemen have been stationed at the gates and other locations.

Nigerian employees of Mobil are denied all rights to pensions and other benefits when they retire or are made redundant. On June 11, management responded to requests to discuss the issue by calling in security guards to remove the workers. This led to the workers walking out on strike.

A senior member of staff told the *Nigerian Vanguard* that the company management always gave excuses to

delay any discussion of pensions. As a result, staff that have worked for Mobil for between 14 and 15 years are retrenched on grounds of redundancy without any benefits. This includes retirement benefits, since these are available only to those who have been employed for 15 years or more.

South African steel strike suspended

The three-week strike of steel workers at Iscor, South Africa, was suspended on June 16.

Dumisa Ntuli, a spokesman of the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA), said, "As things stand now, workers accept the new package proposals offer from the company of R7 million (\$US880,000) for hardship and a new improved salary scale adjustment." He added that the union would meet with Iscor management during the week for further discussions on the agreement and to begin negotiations on wages for 2003. The lowest paid workers would receive an increase of more than R2,500 on their monthly salaries.

Union survey exposes bad conditions on Namibian farms

The Namibian Farm Workers Union (NAFWU) has carried out an investigation into the wages and living conditions of workers on 230 farms in Namibia. They found that up to 40 percent were paid less than the legal minimum wage of \$N429 (\$56) per month. Some workers were paid as little as \$N100 and many were denied the additional \$N210 per month due to them when the farmer does not provide food.

There is widespread use of child labour with no education facilities for the children of farm workers, no protection from unfair dismissals, no job descriptions. In some extreme cases workers have had no annual leave for up to 20 years. NAFWU national organiser Samson Amupanda said, "People are living in terrible conditions. Some are living in shacks and are paid very low wages. On some farms there are children up to the age of 13 who have never gone to school."

Many agricultural workers are illegal immigrants who "are at the mercy of their employers for their basic survival and are therefore in a weak position to demand their rights." They are often employed on a casual basis with employment lasting for only a few days.

Amupanda denies the claim made by some black farmers that they cannot afford to pay their workers the minimum wage because "they have just bought the farm and are still busy paying back the loan... That's no excuse, they must have a business plan and consider labour costs."

National Agricultural Union President Jan de Wet, who is spokesman for most of Namibia's commercial farmers, said that "90 percent or more" of his members complied with the minimum wage legislation. But this was challenged by NAFWU Secretary General Alfred Angola who claimed that farms owned by some ministers and MPs do not pay the required minimum wage and that some "lawmakers" pay their workers between \$N150 and \$N300.

The union is threatening to "name and shame" the farmers responsible, including the MPs. "The honeymoon for the black farmers is over," said Evaristus Kaaronda, Deputy Secretary General of the National Union of Namibian Workers.

Six-month long Nigerian university teachers' strike is suspended

On June 14, Dr. Oladipo Fasina, National President of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), announced that the union had suspended its six-month nationwide strike. The dispute began on December 29 last year and was aimed at forcing the government to implement an agreement signed in June 2001.

According to the *Vanguard* (Lagos) of June 17, Fasina said that the union's national executive (NEC) had decided to suspend the strike after considering appeals made by various stakeholders.

He said, "many patriotic organisations appealed to ASUU in order to resolve the problems threatening the survival of the Nigerian university system. By far the greatest influence on whatever decision the NEC took was the National Association of Nigerian Students and our students whose support and perseverance has been decisive."

Fasina said that the union decided to respect the Industrial Arbitration Panel (IAP) directive on May 28, 2003, which ordered ASUU to suspend the strike while government reverts to the situation before strike began. He added that ASUU resolved to give government two months to settle all the issues, failing that the union might resume its strike.



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