

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

27 June 2003

French workers continue protests against attack on pensions

Workers throughout France continued protests against government pension reforms last week. June 19 was the eighth action day organised by a number of trade unions. During the protests the National Assembly in France were debating and passing legislation making far reaching changes to the pension system.

All over the country some 300,000 people demonstrated. In Paris 70,000 participated in the demonstration. Tens of thousands protested in Marseille, 35,000 in Toulouse, 10,000 in Bordeaux, 20,000 in Le Havre and 15,000 on the French controlled Isle of La Réunion.

The Ministry of Education said there were between four and 12 percent of teachers on strike at different school levels, with just under six percent of non-teaching staff also striking.

Just eight percent of the SNCF rail workers were on strike according to management and scheduled trains ran normally. In 26 towns, public traffic was disturbed, with the most disruption in Clermont-Ferrand, where only 30 to 40 percent of buses were running.

The reduced participation in the strike shows the insidious role being played by the unions in exhausting popular opposition through endless protests while offering no political alternative to the government's attacks. Several days before the unions had given a guarantee to the government not to strike on the first day of baccalaureate examinations on June 12. This was in exchange for a promise by the government to decentralise some 90,000 non-teaching jobs and not 110,000 as initially announced.

Recognising the role of the trade unions, the *Le Monde* newspaper wrote on June 17 that the Minister of Work Francois Fillon "recognised the 'responsible opposition' of the CGT [the Stalinist dominated union federation] 'even in times of strong tensions' which he commended." He owed the union his gratitude as it had "worked so hard to prevent the extension of the movement, which had been in danger of getting out of control."

Gaullist Prime Minister Raffarin and Minister of the Interior Sarkozy were in the town of Corse on June 21, but were not able to hold a scheduled meeting due to a demonstration against the pension plans. Police forces used tear gas against 200 demonstrators organised by the SNCS and CGT unions and the Attac group. Some demonstrators chanted, "Chirac into prison, Raffarin resignation!"

On June 23 a survey in the *La Croix* journal showed that 56 percent of the French people still sympathised with the protests against the pensions changes.

Workers in east Germany continue strike action over hours

Some 9,000 workers in three states in eastern Germany held strike action on June 24 in an ongoing dispute over the number of hours worked in the eastern part of the country.

The rolling action included staff at Volkswagen AG, Europe's largest carmaker and Bombardier Inc., the world's largest producer of passenger railcars.

The campaign is being organised by IG Metall, the second largest union

in the country. The union is demanding the working week in the east be cut from its present 38 hours to 35 hours, but states that it accepts that some companies may "take years" to phase in a decrease in working hours.

Unemployment in the east stands at 19 percent and the longer working hours and government subsidies have been used by successive governments to attract investment to the region.

Manufacturers in the east have rejected any demand to cut working hours until productivity levels, currently a quarter lower than in the west, are increased. An economist at Bankgesellschaft Berlin AG said, "The timing for a strike could hardly be worse, given the state of the German economy. Labour unrest is never an investment incentive for companies."

Teachers and science staff strike in Slovakia

On June 20 a 12-hour strike involving education and science employees hit some 90 percent of Slovakia's schools.

The staff is calling for an increase in education funding in order to support building maintenance and an increase in real wages. The action was called by several trade unions and supported by a number of opposition parties.

Train manufacturing workers in UK protest against plant closure

Employees of the Birmingham based train maker Metro Cammell held a mass meeting on June 24 to protest against the decision to close the plant down.

Earlier this month the French owner, Alstom, announced that it would end production at the plant located in the Washwood Heath district of the city. Up to 1,000 jobs will go when the current production of tilting "Pendolino" trains for Virgin ends next July.

A spokesman from the Amicus trade union said, "The cry from the meeting is that we're not leaving. We will be lobbying the French owners in Paris on July 2 in terms of job losses. Birmingham is not a small place, it's a major, major employer in the area.

The union's campaign is based on nationalism and protectionism. Amicus has condemned the firm for losing the bid to supply London Underground trains to a Spanish company. It has called on the government to insist that all trains running in the UK are made in Britain.

Publishing house workers in Oxford strike

On June 25 workers at the Macmillan Publishing House in Oxford, England held a limited strike over pay. The action involves 80 members of the National Union of Journalists who have rejected a below inflation pay offer by their employers. The staff voted by a margin of two to one in favour of strike action.

The NUJ states that some of its members at Macmillan earn as little as £12,500, making it impossible for them to live in Oxford. Macmillan Oxford is owned by the German based company Holtzbrinck.

Middle East

Israeli pension protest closes ministries in Tel Aviv region

A three-hour strike by the Histadrut labour federation on June 23 closed all government ministries in the Tel Aviv area, including the National Insurance Institute. The action was held to protest against the pension

provisions in the economic recovery plan.

Affected were government offices in Hadera, Netanya, Ra'anana, Kfar Sava, Herzliya, Petah Tikva and Wadi Ara. The protest also closed several roads, including the main route leading to Beilinson Hospital. Government offices and local authorities offices in parts of the north and south of the country closed for two hours as part of the protests.

Trains services were disrupted in Rehovot as were services provided by the Bezeq telephone company and the Israel Electric Corporation. The Barzilai Hospital in Ashkelon was operating on a reduced holiday footing.

Demonstrations were held at the Tapuah junction, the Migdal Haemek junction, near Ein Harod, at the Bilu and Kanot junctions, at the Orlite factory between Nes Ziona and Rehovot, and at the entrance to Ashkelon. Some 150 people demonstrated opposite the Upper Nazareth municipal building.

The day before dozens of trucks and pickups caused heavy traffic jams in Tel Aviv, Bat Yam, Ramat Gan and Bnei Brak. Workers and retirees from Bezeq, the City of Tel Aviv, the Postal Authority and Ichilov Hospital joined in.

The protests were provoked by the planned cut in pension allowances and the decision to invest up to 70 percent of the money maintained by pension funds in the capital market as part of a comprehensive pension sector reform.

The Histadrut is drafting a petition to the High Court, stating that the items of the economic plan pertaining to the pension funds violate property rights, freedom of occupation and the freedom of association of pension fund clients—the plan terminates the representation they had on the boards of directors and in the management of the funds.

A recent examination by Mivtachim—the largest veteran pension fund with over 50 percent of the market share—revealed that implementation of the treasury's reform would abolish the fund's NIS 16 billion (\$US3.7 billion) actuarial. The fund managers are now working with treasury officials to reduce penalties to be imposed on Mivtachim members.

Mivtachim chairman Shmuel Avital has been widely criticised for not going along with Histadrut decisions and has even been accused of collaboration with the treasury to insure he gets to keep his job.

Histadrut is also planning further protests to delay flights at Ben-Gurion airport this week. Stoppages are expected by baggage handlers. Protests at several central major city intersections, in Rishon Letzion, the Interior Ministry, employment bureau's and National Insurance offices, in Ramle, Lod and Rishon Letzion.

Fired Histadrut workers burn their redundancy slips in protest

Histadrut labour federation employees and the regional workers councils held protest meetings last week after 120 members were handed redundancy slips. The workers symbolically burned the pink slips at the meetings.

Histadrut union chair Bracha Zigelman accused management of rushing ahead with the firings before the union could propose an alternative list. "It was an ambush, without allowing the union to respond, meaning the Histadrut acted like the worst employer," Zigelman said at the meeting.

The 120 sackings come on top of the 60 dismissed by the Histadrut earlier this year. Reduction of 20 percent of the organisation's work force is part of plan to deal with a deficit of NIS 1.3 billion.

On June 22, workers will file a petition with the Tel Aviv Labor Tribunal for a temporary injunction stopping the Histadrut from carrying out the firings. The petition says the Histadrut management "acted in bad faith, using ambush tactics to circumvent layoff procedures determined by the collective labour contract."

The banks' unions will hold a protest meeting next week because Histadrut banking division chief Zion Shema was in the group issued with pink slips.

Shop workers strike for living wage in Zambia

Hundreds of workers at Shoprite Checkers supermarkets in Zambia

struck on June 21 to demand an increase in monthly wages from 200,000 kwacha (\$US50) to 500,000 kwacha (\$US120).

Management denounced the strike as illegal, but Zambia's Human Rights Commission (HRC) said the action was justified. HRC commissioner, John Sakulanda, said that many workers at Shoprite were put on probation for more than one year, in violation of Zambian labour laws. He added that it was not the first time the Commission has expressed concern over the poor working conditions at Shoprite.

The strikers said they had been asking management to increase salaries without any success. One cashier said that their monthly salary could be as low as K80,000 (\$US16.50). She said this was too low to buy proper meals for their families: "A bag of 50 kg mealie meal costs K45,000. How does someone expect us to feed our families and pay their tuition with the remaining K35,000?"

Other workers said the senior managers were getting good salaries, but the lower grade workers were working under bad conditions. Workers had lost their jobs, with no payment of benefits, just for being off work for a few days. "There is no security despite us getting peanuts," said one of the workers.

National Union of Commercial and Industrial Workers national vice-president Peter Banda said workers would be going back to work on June 24, giving management time to re-enter salary negotiations from July 9 to 11.

Zimbabwean power workers dispersed by riot police

Workers at the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) walked out on June 17 to demand the reinstatement of nine colleagues who had been suspended for taking part in strike action last month. An official of the Zimbabwe Electricity Energy Workers' Union (ZEEWU) said that workers from Karoi, Kariba, Chinhoyi and Mhangura were participating in the strike.

The earlier strike, which began on May 26, was in support of a claim for higher pay and demanded the removal of the Executive Chairman Sydney Gata, whom the strikers accused of mismanaging the ZESA pension fund.

ZESA management has refused to negotiate over the demand for reinstatement. By law Zimbabwean power workers are forbidden to take industrial action and management has declared the strike illegal.

On June 19 armed riot police attacked a strike meeting outside the company's Workington offices in Harare. Although none of the strikers sustained any injuries on that occasion, several striking ZESA employees were hurt when a similar meeting was attacked by riot police during the previous strike.

A ZEEWU official told the *Daily News* (Harare), "Workers were meeting to deliberate on the latest developments and the police arrived on the scene and everyone immediately left for their homes because they were afraid.... The strike will continue until management treats us as equal partners."



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