

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

14 July 2003

French art workers continue protests

On July 10, the renowned Avignon cultural festival in France was cancelled due to the ongoing art workers' industrial action. The festival is attended by of thousands of people and was set to start on July 7.

The opera festival in nearby Aix-en-Provence has also been cancelled.

Over the past two weeks, many art workers and performers have walked out in protest at new regulations covering their unemployment benefits. The workers are mainly temporary staff that perform in many of the summer festivals organised around the country. New legislation will reduce from 12 to 8 the number of months for which artistic workers who often work sporadically can claim unemployment benefits in each year. Workers will have to work for 507 hours every 8 months to qualify, rather than the same amount of hours every 12 months.

A number of trade unions are involved in the dispute and are on record that they will continue to oppose an agreement that three unions—the CFDT, CFTD and CGC—have signed with the employers' organisations Medef, UPA and CGPME.

The CGT called for a general strike, to begin on July 8. On July 8 the CGT and FO called for the strikes to be escalated. Several demonstrations were held that thousands attended, including a protest in Paris, a 6,000-strong rally in Avignon and a demonstration of 100 in Toulouse. In the city of Strasbourg, 40 people occupied the regional cultural headquarters; and in La Rochelle, the demonstrators hindered the performance of the "Festival of Francofolies."

The performers of the popular television film *Avocats et Associés*, Josephine Ange Gardien and Julie Lescaut, are also striking in support.

On July 9, Culture Minister Jean-Jacques Aillagon said the government would not make any concessions regarding the cuts to be introduced in 2004 and 2005. He announced that the government was fighting "a war against abuse of the assurance scheme."

Postal workers in London vote to strike over pay

Postal workers in London have voted to strike by a large majority in pursuit of an increased pay deal. On July 7, the Communications Workers Union (CWU) announced that London's 32,000 postal workers had voted to reject Royal

Mail's proposed £100-a-year pay increase. The union is calling for an increase of more than £1,200 for workers in central London, and more than £2,000 for postal workers in outer London. No date has yet been set for strike action.

The strike is set to halt postal delivery and post office counter service in the London area. Royal Mail is currently implementing a large-scale restructuring project to slash its costs by £1.4 billion. The plans will also see the closure of 3,000 of its 9,000 urban post offices by December 2004.

Chemical workers in northern England vote to strike

On June 30, more than 600 employees of Rhodia in the towns of Oldbury and Widnes in England voted for industrial action to keep their final salary scheme open to new employees. Rhodia is a French-owned chemical producing company.

The workers at Oldbury voted 70.7 percent while members at Widnes voted 95.5 percent in favour of industrial action. They are members of the GMB and Amicus trade unions.

The company cut employer contribution levels by 4 percent of pay until the end of 2002. This reduced employer contribution levels from 18 to 14 percent for the last three years.

Kevin Curran, the GMB General Secretary, said, "GMB members recognise that closing the scheme to new members is just the first step to eventually stripping current workers of their hard earned pensions. Employers need to get the clear message that they cannot back off from their duty. People cannot be left to face pensioner poverty after a lifetime of hard work."

Lebanese government decision to close quarries sparks demonstrations

A government decision to close rock and sand quarries in the country has sparked widespread protests including strikes, sit-ins and the burning of car tires. The issue was raised at a June 30 meeting between Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and a delegation representing the Contractors Association, as well as the Order of Engineers and Architects.

Delegation leader Fouad Khazen said the closure of quarries has led to a "tragic situation," and that the matter could be dealt with in a "technical and modern way" without a negative effect on the environment and the living conditions of the majority of people. "Quarries, diesel oil and garbage are problems dealt with in all countries of the world. We in Lebanon have not tried to cure the patient but have killed him to solve the problem.

This is not a solution,” said Khazen.

Sit-ins in the Baalbek and Akkar regions blocked the main roads for several hours, with the protesters setting car tires on fire and carrying placards demanding the government revoke its decision. In the north, around 1,500 trucks parked across the main highway under the Batroun Hospital bridge from the early morning, until they were eventually forced to disperse by security forces.

A number of legislators also took part in the protest, including Kesrouan MP Farid Khazen, who accused the authorities of forming “suspicious deals.” Two Cabinet members, Environment Minister Fares Boueiz and Public Works and Transport Minister Najib Mikati, have called for amending the decision to move quarries to the eastern mountain range.

In the Bekaa region, owners of quarries and trucks, as well as their families and scores of workers in the sector, staged a sit-in in Chtoura. Several empty trucks were parked on the main Damascus Road in the Chtoura-Masnaa area. The dismantling of quarries in the Hasbaya and Western Bekaa regions have had a crippling effect on the construction industry in particular and on workers’ living conditions in general. Amin Zuweihed said that stopping the quarries from operating meant that the “shadow of hunger is now covering thousands of families, who have become unemployed.”

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Nigerian unions end general strike

The leaders of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) have called off the general strike that paralysed economic life in Nigeria for eight days from June 30. The strike protested against the decision of the Petroleum Products Regulatory Agency (PPRA) to increase fuel prices. It involved broad sections of the economy including banks, iron, steel and chemical industries, transport, aviation and government offices, as well as traders, market women and students.

NLC president Adams Oshiomhole described the compromise offer by the federal government to increase prices by 31 percent instead of the original 54 percent as a “triumph of the will of the people.” He said, “Given the suffering and deprivation Nigerians have suffered within the last few days, the NLC had a compelling duty to avail the people some relief by suspending the strike.” According to *Vanguard* (Lagos), the suspension of strike action has been “received with mixed feelings by the public.”

At the weekend, the Trade Union Congress (TUC), a grouping of senior staff unions, attempted to undermine the strike by announcing that senior staff in the public and private sectors were returning to work. This provoked protest action by the strikers in the capital Lagos and other cities. From early morning on July 7 roads were barricaded and bonfires were lit. The protesters included students, as well as members of United Action for Democracy (UAD) and other organisations. They

dismissed the NLC proposal for a compromise agreement, saying that the prices of goods and transport fares would not come down. The sharp rise in fuel prices will increase the poverty and desperation of millions in Nigeria where 70 percent of the population lives on less than US\$1 a day.

The strikers resisted attempts by the police to remove the barricades, and violent clashes ensued in several cities. The police fired tear gas and live ammunition into the crowds, killing at least 18 people. Ten strikers were shot dead by the police in Lagos. The police have denied responsibility and blame “hoodlums” for the killings.

The NLC has asked the National Assembly to establish a public inquiry into the police killings and has demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all persons arrested in connection with the strike. It called on employers not to invoke the “no-work-no-pay” principle, warning that strikes would be called in any establishment that does so.

Cold storage workers strike in Zimbabwe

Workers at the Cold Storage Company’s (CSC’s) facility in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, have been on strike since July 2 to demand a wage increase in line with the country’s hyperinflation.

The strikers have warned that the action could spread to other branches of the company if pay talks do not take place as scheduled. The strike was prompted by news that CSC had cancelled the talks due to a lack of finance.

Aaron Muranga, the Cold Storage Company National Workers’ Union secretary-general, said employees were sending a message to management that collective bargaining should be resumed: “We agreed last month that the talks should go ahead as planned, but now management has reneged from its promise. What we need is a salary increment, which is just in line with inflation. We also want housing allowances. This is not a full-scale industrial action but we will do so if our demands are not met.”

The workplace in Masvingo is a state-of-the-art complex that underwent a US\$19 million renovation seven years ago.



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