

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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Railworkers' industrial action ends in Austria

On November 14, railworkers in Austria ended a three-day strike in a dispute over government plans to sell off the state-run rail network.

The strike affected an estimated 1.2 million commuters. It was the first open-ended industrial action in Austria since the Second World War. Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel welcomed the end of the action, which he attributed to "the firm stance of the government."

The government and the rail unions are currently holding talks.

The government intends to divide the Austrian Federal Railways into nine private companies run by a holding company. This will involve the sacking of up to 12,000 of the network's 48,000 workers by 2010 and the eradication of working conditions and benefits, including making it easier for management to fire employees.

Following the dispute, Transportation Minister Hubert Gorbach stated that the government would continue with its privatisation plans but had not finalised what workers' conditions and contracts would be. The privatisation is expected to be sanctioned by parliament in December and to come into force on January 1.

Polish miners strike in Silesia to oppose pit closure plans

Polish coal miners in the southern region of Silesia began a 24-hour strike on November 17 in an ongoing dispute over pit closures. The government announced plans to close four mines as part of a restructuring of the industry before the country joins the European Union next May.

The closures will result in the loss of 8,500 miners jobs in a region that already has 30 percent unemployment.

During the day, miners held rallies or changing-room sit-ins at pits in the region. Miners' union leaders announced that a general strike could be held if the government does not reverse its plans. The workers have held a series of protests and demonstrations this year, including a September demonstration in the capital city of Warsaw. The unions have not opposed closures outright, but have called for the merger of the collieries or a partial closure. The restructuring will see 25,000 of the industry's 140,000 jobs lost.

Electrical workers' union in Finland calls strike

This week, the Finnish Electrical Workers' Union announced that it was calling on its members to participate in either a half-day or one-day strike to protest job cutbacks and attacks on pension rights by companies.

The union has submitted a resolution to the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) calling on all other trade unions to join any stoppage.

On December 5, the Finnish Confederation for Salaried Employees (STTK) will hold a protest to oppose personnel cutbacks and has called on affiliated unions to support it. The SAK has yet to back that action, and is to hold a delegate meeting next weekend to decide on

the matter.

Car workers at Nissan, Sunderland, to ballot on strike action

Car workers employed at the Nissan plant on Wearside in northeast England are to ballot over plans to redeploy some 60 jobs.

The strike ballot will be the first at the plant since it opened in 1986. Employing 4,500 people, the plant has been rated as the world's most efficient car factory.

The ballot follows a company announcement that it intends to switch its purchasing department from Sunderland to Bedfordshire, about 240 miles south.

Youth workers in England set to strike over pay and conditions

The Community and Youth Workers' Union in England (CYWU) is to hold a ballot in a dispute over pay and new contract conditions.

The youth workers are employed to assist and help adolescents and teenagers. The union has rejected a pay offer of 3 percent from the Employers' Organisation (EO), their local authority employers who have also demanded the introduction of a new qualification scheme.

Maggie Foster, a neighbourhood youth worker for West Sussex council, said this week, "I'm really angry at the way our profession is being undervalued and undermined. Everybody wants our skills but local authorities aren't prepared to pay for it. Some young people who attend my youth club are earning more filling supermarket shelves than my part-time staff."

French temporary art workers and technicians continue dispute

For four months, French temporary art workers and technicians, members of the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) and Force Ouvrière (FO) trade unions, and their own "Coordination" organisation, have been campaigning against an agreement negotiated between the employers' organisation Medef and minority unions. The agreement has also been agreed and sponsored by the government.

On November 13, some 2,000 demonstrated in front of the headquarters of the "Unedic" teachers' union federation where the minority unions signed the final agreement with the employers' representatives. Further protests took place in the cities of Lyon, Marseille and Nantes.

The CGT and FO denounced the agreement as "machinations" and "wheeling and dealings," demanding "a real reform that is negotiated by all concerned parties," including new rights for the temporarily employed that would avoid demotion and precarious living conditions.

Midwives' strike continues in France

Since November 5, 12 of the 14 midwives at the hospital of "parc de Chambrey" near Tours have struck for increased wages and better working conditions. The management of the hospital tried to implement compulsory service at a Tours law court, forcing midwives to work, but did not succeed.

The prefect (representative of the government for the department Indre-et-Loire) signed a November 14 edict obligating the women to work for eight days. This edict is based on a new legal order of March 18, 2003, known as "loi pour la sécurité intérieure" (law for interior

security), also called “law Sarkozy”.

This is the first time the ruling has been applied during a conflict between workers and a private employer. The prefect said that the serious difficulties would justify this measure, whereby he would defend “the right to life” of the mothers and their babies.

The midwives have denounced the actions of the employers and pointed out that the necessary staff are usually not available and that this was the real threat to life. They said that 50 percent more staff are needed.

Banking sector on strike in Guinea

Bank workers throughout Guinea began indefinite strike action this week over demands for salary increases and better conditions of work. Banks were shut down throughout the country, with customers unable to withdraw or deposit money.

Negotiations between the Association of Professional Bankers—the umbrella union covering all bank workers—and government representatives broke down after nearly a year of negotiations. “We will only go back to work once our conditions are met and it is left with the government to determine how soon that will be,” said Ibrahim Fofana, the union’s official spokesman.

The unions are also complaining that expatriates head virtually all the banking institutions in the country. Guinea, already one of the poorest countries in the world, has suffered a sharp decline in its economy over the last year with inflation now running at more than 30 percent.

Kenya university lecturers continue strike

The strike at Kenya’s six state universities continued into a second week after officials of the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) walked out of a meeting called by the government-appointed arbitration panel. They rejected the panel’s return-to-work formula as a tactic to buy time without making any proposals for salary increases that are the main reason for the lecturer’s action.

The government side claimed that salary negotiations couldn’t begin, as the union at five out of the six universities had failed to sign recognition agreements with the employers. In addition, the panel claimed that the UASU should have given the government an additional seven days’ notice after the mandatory 21-day notice had expired. The panel was reflecting the official stance of the Kenyan government—that salary negotiations would only begin after the lecturers returned to work.

After the panel meeting collapsed, Education Minister George Saitoti held direct talks with UASU officials this week. Saitoti only repeated earlier government pledges that the lecturers would be offered a pay rise after they returned to work, but failed to make a concrete offer. “By the look of things, the strike may continue for long because the government is not giving any tangible promise,” one of the UASU officials is reported as saying. The officials pointed out that their members were growing impatient as the discussions with the government were taking too long.

The lecturers are asking for salaries ranging from Sh159,000 a month for the lowest paid to Sh895,000 for professors, compared to current levels of Sh17,000 to Sh31,000 (Sh1,000 = US\$13).

Kenyan textile workers tear-gassed by police

Police threw tear gas canisters to disperse 2,000 striking textile workers at Kenya Knit Garments (EPZ) Ltd. The workers were demanding to be recognised as members of the Kenya Tailoring and Textile Workers Union. Workers at the factory situated in Kilifi district, near Mombasa, had begun their day holding a peaceful protest outside the plant, calling for the resignation of some of the

management. Management responded by calling in the police.

Zimbabwe: government arrests trade unionists

Seven leaders of the Zimbabwe doctors’ strike, now in its third week, were arrested last weekend. Their strike action was declared illegal by the Labour Court, contravening the Labour Relations Act that prohibits those working in essential services from taking industrial action.

Four of the seven are executive members of the Hospital Doctors Association (HDA). Their lawyer said that they had been released after questioning and would appear in court this week. Dr. Elias Phiri, the vice-president of the HDA, warning that the doctors’ arrests would only worsen the situation in country’s health service, said, “They can only arrest us at their own peril, as that will only exacerbate the situation.”

The doctors are asking for an 8,000 percent pay rise to bring their monthly salary to Z\$30 million (about US\$36,407 at official exchange rate levels, but in reality worth far less). Many doctors have left Zimbabwe for jobs in the West—18 more have left since the strike began.

On November 18, leading members of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), as well as opposition politicians, were arrested for holding a protest demonstration over price rises and state harassment. Police stated they had arrested 88 people, but the ZCTU said that more than 360 were arrested in the capital Harare and towns throughout Zimbabwe. Among those arrested is ZCTU chairman Lovemore Matombo. The ZCTU has called a two-day general strike for November 20 and 21 to protest the arrests. This is timed to coincide with the government’s budget statement.

Zimbabwe’s economy is now in a state of collapse, with official inflation at running at 526 percent and unemployment at 70 percent. A BBC report says that response to the strike call is “patchy.” It cites state repression and the government’s now total control of the media as the reason, but it is also the case that the ZCTU, allied with the pro-IMF opposition Movement for Democratic Change, has lost much of its support over the last period, as its policies failed to offer a way forward for working people and the landless poor.



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