

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

14 November 2003

Metal workers hold mass demonstration in Rome

On November 7, more than 200,000 metal workers demonstrated in Rome in pursuit of a new contract and increased pay. The metal workers are mainly members of the Italian Federation of Metal Workers (FIOM), which is affiliated to the General Labour Confederation. FIOM represents about half the workers in the metal and mechanical sectors.

According to the union, between 40 and 50 percent of the workers at carmaker Fiat's main plant in Turin participated in the eight-hour strike and demonstration. Prior to the strike two smaller unions, the Federation of Mechanical Industries and the Italian Union of Metal-Mechanical Workers, signed an agreement with employers and instructed their members not to participate in the strike. The unions agreed on a 4.5 percent pay increase with the employers.

The striking workers want an 8.5 percent pay increase. Another eight-hour strike would be held in the future if the dispute were not resolved.

Call centre employees in Newcastle, England to ballot for industrial action

Call centre workers employed by the Lloyds TSB bank in Newcastle, north east England are to vote on industrial action next week to protest plans by their employers to close the call centre and move some call-handling services to Bangalore in India. The call centre currently employs almost 1,000 people and is due to close by the end of next year.

The ballot is to be held by the finance union UNIFI, which represents members at the call centre. Lloyds TSB said the decision to close the centre was part of its responsibility to run the business competitively.

Union calls off baggage workers strike at Heathrow, London

On November 4, a strike by Heathrow baggage handlers employed by Swissport was called off following an agreement between Transport and General Workers Union and company management. The workers began industrial action earlier this month in a dispute over proposed job losses and restructuring.

As part of the deal, job losses will still go ahead with a clause that they will not be compulsory. The Transport and General Workers Union has recommended acceptance of the agreement in a ballot this week. The union also announced that a pay deal had been agreed that would be backdated to January or April of this year.

Temporary art workers and technicians continue dispute

in France

On November 6, a Paris court rejected an application by the CGT trade union that laws enabling cuts in the unemployment entitlements of temporary art workers and technicians be suspended. Three other unions, the CFDT, CFTC, and CGC, have accepted the laws, which are due to be implemented in January 2004. The court ruled that it had no authority to suspend the legislation.

On November 9, a Paris confederation of temporary workers demonstrated at the Carrousel du Louvre in Paris, using the occasion of the "Salon du patrimoine" (parlour of cultural heritage) to force free entrance during the afternoon. The federation issued a statement saying, "It costs 11 euro to visit this commercial forum that is luxuriously presented. We do not accept that the cultural politics favours these merchant orientations".

On November 10, a group of workers interrupted the television journal of France-2 to denounce the pension cuts. The editorial staff of France-2 allowed a representative of the demonstrators to read a declaration for one minute. The speakers denounced the destructive nature of the legislative reform, which will result in 30,000 people being removed from unemployment protection schemes.

Electricity workers set to strike in Greece

Public Power Corporation workers in Greece are set to begin 24-hour industrial action on November 18. The employees plan to walk off the job in protest at the state-run firm's efforts to secure electricity from the private sector. The move by the company is in anticipation of increased power requirements for the Athens 2004 Olympics.

The GENOP-DEH union representing the workers stated that the tender breached statutory regulations introduced four months ago.

Kenya's state university lecturers strike

Kenya's six state universities—Nairobi, Moi, Kenyatta, Jomo Kenyatta, Egerton and Maseno—were closed by the government on November 10, the first day of industrial action by lecturers in support of their demand for higher salaries and increased housing allowances.

At Maseno University the University Council had already awarded a three months' salary and house allowance to its staff in the hope of averting the strike. However, UASU Secretary General Maseno chapter Dr Billy Ngonga said lecturers would still go ahead with the strike, despite the council's "good

gesture". Students at the university received notices at 2.45 p.m., on November 10 ordering them to quit the campus by 3 p.m.

At Njoro main campus 4,000 students said they supported the lecturers and warned the administration against closing the place.

University of Nairobi lecturers, who are doctors at Kenyatta National Hospital and Chiromo mortuary, joined the strike but mortuary services were not affected.

Lecturers at Moi University held talks for about three hours before marching to the administration block and announcing that they had joined the strike.

At Kenyatta National Hospital, where 150 post-graduate students work in casualty, dental and orthopaedic surgery, radiology, pharmacy, pathology and gynaecology, as well as other post-graduate students participated in the strike action. Many students supported the strike, saying poor pay had been the cause of low morale among academic staff.

As soon as the strike began a meeting was organised at the Ministry of Labour headquarters in Nairobi between a hurriedly appointed government panel and officials of UASU and the universities.

There is widespread pressure on the government to reach a speedy settlement, including from Catholic bishops, teachers and parents and the former ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU). However, the *Nation* reports, "one sticking point to a quick settlement is likely to be the government's inability to give an immediate award in case it jeopardises talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), scheduled for later this month."

Education Permanent Secretary Karega Mutahi had told the paper that consultations were being held to have the matter resolved by the Labour ministry. "As we wait for our minister to come back from an official trip abroad, we are consulting our labour experts on how to handle the matter."

After a meeting of striking lecturers at Maseno University on November 11, union secretary general Billy Ngonga said they would remain out of campus and added: "We were asked to vacate campus by the government and so we did. We go by what they want and if they want us back we will do so, but only with money in our hands."

Uhuru Kenyatta, leader of the opposition party KANU has denied government claims that his party is behind the strike. He said the government should stop shifting blame for the strike and find a lasting solution. "KANU has no interest in causing the strike. We are a mature opposition and the government should know it is its responsibility to ensure its proper resolution, if not it should give way."

The Kenya Institute of Public Policy Research and Analysis has been mandated by the Ministry of Education to work out a possible solution. It says it is on course and expects to complete its proposals between November 15 and November 30.

Police have increased security around Nairobi and Kenyatta

universities. Nairobi provincial police chief Jonathan Koskei said, "We will not allow any demonstration on the streets because the government declared the strike is illegal."

This is the second time in 10 years that universities were shut down because of strike action by lecturers. In 1994 UASU called similar strike, which lasted almost a year.

On the day before the strike Education Assistant Minister Beth Mugo warned that the government would take a strong line. "If they go on strike, it will be a different ball game," she said. She threatened that if the strike went ahead the salary package promised for next February would be cancelled.

Striking Zimbabwe doctors threatened with arrest

The Zimbabwe government has ordered the arrest of all striking state hospital doctors for defying a return-to-work order. The doctors face contempt of court charges for ignoring a labour tribunal directive, issued on November 6 that they should end their strike. The strike was declared illegal because "the doctors did not follow legal procedures of channelling their grievances when they embarked on the strike".

Mariyawanda Nzuwah, head of the government human resources agency, the Public Services Commission (PSC), said the PSC "has requested the commissioner of police to bring before the courts of law all those doctors who have violated the law and the attorney general to prosecute them forthwith."

Nzuwah said the doctors were in breach of labour laws that prohibit workers in essential services, such as the medical field and the uniformed forces, from striking. He said the doctors had "deliberately and intentionally violated the law and therefore committed a criminal offence".

The doctors, who work at government run hospitals, have been on strike for three weeks in support of a demand for higher salaries. In the face of the soaring Zimbabwean inflation rate they can barely meet their most basic needs for food and shelter.

Nzuwah declared that their demands were "ridiculous and unacceptable". He added that the doctors were being contemptuous of parliament, which promulgated the labour laws, and President Mugabe who enacted them.

Despite the labour tribunal order, doctors vowed not to return to work until they had a written undertaking from the government to deal with their demands.

Military doctors and consultant medical staff brought in from Cuba and the Democratic Republic of Congo have treated serious and emergency cases at hospitals affected by the strike. Nurses, who went on strike days after the doctors, have since returned to work, after the government promised to address their grievances.



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