

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

28 November 2003

## **Greek public sector workers hold further day of protests**

On November 19 workers at hospitals, schools and public services across Greece took strike action organised by the public service union ADEDY. Olympic Airways cancelled 23 domestic flights in preparation for the industrial action.

The stoppage, the second 24-hour nationwide strike this month, was the latest in an ongoing series of public sector strikes over the past two months. The disputes involve a number of demands including higher basic rates of pay and greater financial compensation for those involved in dangerous work. The Greek government has rejected the demands and refused to discuss them with trade unions.

## **Aerospace workers in Northern Ireland strike in pay and cost cutting dispute**

On November 26 more than 4,000 workers at Belfast aerospace firm Shorts walked out on strike in dispute over pay and restructuring. Members of the Amicus and Transport Workers' unions have taken the action in a dispute over pay and cost cutting.

Following the stoppage management and trade unions held discussions at the Labour Relations Agency.

The dispute has been ongoing for the past six months after workers rejected a four-year pay deal agreed by unions and management. Employees are concerned about the introduction of afternoon shifts and possible redundancies.

Shorts is the biggest manufacturing firm in Northern Ireland and is owned by the Canadian Bombardier company.

Jackie Pollock of the Amicus union stated that the company had not responded to trade union proposals put forward over a week ago. She said that the union had been seeking a negotiated settlement rather than a strike: "There was no need for this current dispute to take place as an all-out stoppage. They could have resolved it round the table within the last eight days. They've had 2,000 redundancies, the company are trying to erode terms and conditions within the workplace, and the employees are saying enough is enough."

In May Shorts cut 600 jobs and announced that a further 580 would go before next April. In August the company revised the latter figure to fewer than 100.

## **Local Authority workers in London continue cost of living stoppages**

Local council workers in London continued their 18-month dispute over cost of living allowances, holding a strike on November 24. London weighting is offered to all public sector workers in the capital to compensate for the high cost of living. London is the most expensive city in which to live in Europe for housing and public transport. London Weighting allowance currently ranges from £1,400 a year in outer London to £2,600 in

inner London.

Hundreds of UNISON members including housing benefit workers, school support staff and caretakers were involved in the latest selective strike. The public sector union is seeking a £4,000 a year London Weighting allowance.

## **French students and academic staff strike to oppose restructuring**

Students and academic staff at eight French universities took strike action on November 20 to protest plans by the government to introduce a Europe-wide form of degree and to restructure the French university system.

Many students and student bodies fear that the changes will result in French universities being forced to compete with one another and undermine the automatic right of every French student who passes the Baccalaureate to go to university. Under the new proposals universities would be more dependent on private investors.

During the protests students at 15 universities, mainly on human sciences courses, began a strike on November 21. Universities involved included Aix 1, Amiens, Brest, Caen, Chambéry, Lille 3, Lyon 2, Metz, Nancy 2, Nice, Perpignan, Paris 10, Strasbourg, and Versailles-St. Quentin.

The government intends to introduce a new Europe-wide system of degrees—licence-master-doctorate (LMD)—on the basis that it will encourage universities to compete for the "best students". Universities with less than 15,000 students could be forced to merge under the proposals. Others measures planned are that presidents of the universities no longer have to be professors of the university and are to be members of the public services. Management at universities are to have greater influence on personnel questions such as employment and dismissal and temporary employment.

On November 21 the education ministry promised a "new text" on reforms over the next three months and promised to change the plans governing selection for university places. But the proposals did not pacify the students. On November 29, a national coordination meeting of students is to be held in Rennes, where students will discuss a common platform.

## **French teaching and technical staff strike for increased funding**

On November 24 more than 80 percent of teaching and technical staff at the Lycée Polyvalent Francois-Mansard in the town of Thizy began a strike to denounce the "catastrophic" financial situation of the school. The stoppage was supported by parents.

Spending cutbacks have resulted in the provision of basic items such as paper and chalk being suspended for the year 2003, so that teachers have to provide them.

In May and June the educational workers held a number of strikes and demonstrations demanding more personnel, better financial allocation and higher wages as well as rejecting the education decentralisation currently being implemented by the government.

This year 55,000 teaching assistant posts are to be abolished. A portion of these are to be replaced by a lower grade of teaching assistants.

#### **Shell workers strike in Namibia**

Workers at the Shell fuel depots in Windhoek and Tsumeb, Namibia, began strike action last week over a pay claim. Negotiations began in April between the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN) and Shell management but broke down with Shell refusing to increase pay by more than eight percent.

The union demanded a 14 percent overall increase which they later dropped to 10 percent and have sent a letter to the management requesting more negotiations. Shell claim they have made alternative plans to keep petrol stations and transport companies supplied with fuel.

#### **Congo rail workers persecuted**

A human rights group, the Association Africaine de Defense des Droits de l'Homme (ASADHO), has protested the treatment of striking railway workers and their families in Likasi, south east in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Workers have suffered arrests, beatings, extortion and rape at the hands of the police and military acting on behalf of the national railway company, the Societe Nationale de Chemin de Fer du Congo (SNCC). The workers began strike action on November 13 to demand payment of nine months pay arrears.

SNCC have denied the accusation and claim most of the strikers have returned to work but the report from IRIN states that the workers were attacked and are still on strike until the arrears are paid. Felix Kalonda, the local workshop foreman, said, "We went to the work site on the orders of the city mayor, but we left a few hours later because no firm promises were being made."

#### **Nurses strike in Ivory Coast**

Nurses in the government controlled south of Ivory Coast have begun indefinite strike action to demand improved protection from contagious diseases following the death of six nurses over the last three years. The six had been infected by patients with illnesses such as AIDS and tuberculosis.

Nurses are demanding the government supply them with disposable rubber gloves and face masks and pay a 10 percent risk premium above their monthly salary of 140,000 CFA francs (\$US230) per month. The National Union of Nurses of Cote d'Ivoire (SYNICI) said that 90 percent of the 7,000 members were taking part in the strike. Doctors and assistant nurses are reported to be still working.

Ivory Coast is divided between north and south and policed by French troops so the strike does not affect the north of the country where hospitals and health centres are run by NGOs.

#### **More strikes hit Zimbabwe**

A number of strikes are taking place in Zimbabwe as workers demand pay rises to keep up with hyperinflation, now reaching an official level of nearly 600 percent but much higher at black market rates.

Several hundred workers at Dunstan Transport in Harare, on strike now for three weeks, have been served legal notice to appear before a government labour officer or return to work. Otherwise they could face a jail term of up to five years. The workers who drive trucks transporting food and hospital supplies are demanding payment of an agreed pay rise backdated to October 1. Workers' committee chairman David Moyo said the men were paid between \$Z8,000 and \$Z40,000 per week (\$US10 to \$50 at official rates). "This money cannot even cover one's bus fare let alone food and other necessities," he said. The owner of the company, Mr William Rodney Dunstan, has not been seen since November 10.

Postal workers at Zimpost have begun strike action for the fifth time this year demanding that their salaries are increased to a minimum of \$Z200,000 a month (\$US250 at official rates). Zimpost management have refused to negotiate with the Communications & Allied Services Workers' Union of Zimbabwe (CASWUZ) over the cost of living rise. Workers take home \$Z60,000 after tax. CASWUZ calculate that transport costs for an average worker based on 26 days travel to and from work now stand at \$Z66,000.00, \$Z6,000 more than they earn. Zimpost are now taking legal proceedings to get the union banned.

Workers at the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (Zimsec) began strike action two weeks ago during end-of year examinations, demanding a review of their pay and working conditions. Many students have yet to obtain their examination results. A spokesman for the National Education Union of Zimbabwe (NEUZ) said, "Workers here would not be so incensed if they did not see their bosses flaunting obscene riches while they languish in abject poverty. Just recently they acquired seven mobile phones for the top management.... They have also bought a new fleet of luxury Mazda sedan cars and yet workers are literally working for transport fares alone."

Doctors, now on strike throughout Zimbabwe for over a month, were joined this week by nurses. Public hospitals were turning away new patients and only dealing with emergencies. The nurses joined doctors at the start of their dispute but went back to work after they were promised an 800 percent pay rise. They have now rejoined the doctors because when they received their November salaries they found there was no increase. Zimbabwe's health service is in a state of crisis as doctors, nurses and health professionals have left the country in large numbers and the lack of foreign currency has meant shortages of essential drugs and medical equipment.



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