Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

5 December 2003

Thousands demonstrate against the Ukrainians government

On December 3 thousands protested against government economic policy outside the Ukrainian legislature. The demonstration condemned the economic policies of the government of Prime Minster Viktor Yanukovych announced in the 2004 budget, including a cut in the minimum wage.

Some of the 10,000 in attendance at the demonstration, including supporters of the "Our Ukraine" movement, Yulia Tymoshenko blocs and the Socialist Party, chanted slogans such as "Down with the government!" The protests included a delegation of coal miners who banged their helmets on the ground.

On December 2 the legislature voted to slash the monthly minimum wage by 14 percent, just seven months after the wage had been raised to the equivalent of about $58. The following day President Leonid Kuchma signed a law introducing the new monthly minimum wage of $50. The wage was cut only a few days after bread prices began rising, as Ukrainian bakeries began using higher-priced imported grain. This followed a shortage caused by a poor winter harvest and alleged wheat market manipulation resulted in excessive exports of grain.

Olympic Airways staff in Greece strike

On November 28, cabin staff at Olympic Airways in Greece began a 48-hour strike in a contract dispute. The stoppage resulted in the national carrier cancelling 13 international and 12 domestic flights.

The workers held the strike in defiance of a court order demanding they return to work.

The attendants were protesting plans by the company to have them transferred to a new streamlined carrier—Olympic Airlines. Workers fear that the new airline will demand staff work longer hours and take pay cuts. December 1 was supposed to be the first day of operations of Olympic Airlines, but management has been forced to temporarily hold off on launching the new operation.

The new airline is set to employ 1,800 people and the remainder of the 6,100 employees will stay at the old company and offer services to the new one.

Italian airline staff strike against restructuring

Employees at Italian state airline Alitalia took industrial action on November 28 that resulted in the cancellation of 195 domestic and international flights. The stoppage held by ground staff and crews was in opposition to a restructuring plan. During the course of the four-hour strike 25,000 passengers were left stranded at Rome's Fiumicino airport.

It is estimated that the present workforce could be reduced by 2,700 were Alitalia to merge its operations with two other European airlines Air France and KLM. The airline is heavily indebted and has forecast a full-year operating loss of over €400 million.

Finnish paper workers hold national stoppage

Finnish paper workers held a national 24-hour strike on December 3 as part of a campaign to oppose employers' proposals to implement job cuts. The action was organised by the Paperworkers' Union and at began at 6.00 a.m. The process of shutting down the paper machines began the previous evening.

Some 28,000 employees at a total of 20 pulp mills and 40 paper mills took part. It is estimated that the strike and the processes involved with starting the paper machines will cost manufacturers 40 million euros.

The Paperworkers' Union called the strike following paper manufacturers' announcing plans to eliminate about 2,000 jobs in the pulp industry. Last week, the Finland Labour Court imposed two fines on the union for threatening a national stoppage—one of €5,000 and one of €11,500.

There have been 12 local strikes in the industry this year. The last nationwide industrial action was held in 2000.

UK Call centre workers protest against job losses

On December 3, almost 1,000 workers employed by Lloyds TSB call centre in Tyneside, northeast England held a demonstration to oppose plans by the bank to relocate their jobs to India. The bank is planning to close its Newcastle centre, employing almost 1,000 workers by the end of 2004.

The Finance union Unifi is currently organising a ballot for industrial action against the job losses and petitioning Lloyds TSB staff at all call centre sites around the UK. The union is calling for a five-year guarantee that no call centre will close. A spokesman for Unifi said, "Staff feel betrayed that the company is only concerned with maximising profits. Unifi is confident that staff will vote for action as they are not prepared to go quietly and let the bank off the hook."

French students protest in national day of action

All over France 30,000 students demonstrated on November 27. At Paris a demonstration of 8,000 to 10,000 was held. Others were held at Aix, Marseille, Amiens, Besancon, Brest, Caen, Chambéry, Grenoble, Lille, Lyon, Metz, Montpellier, Nancy, Nantes, Nice, Perpignan, Poitiers, Rennes, Rouen, Toulouse, Tours, and Reims. Some 30 of the 90 French universities were asked to join the day of action by the student unions UNEF, SUD-students and CNT-FAU.

At their national meeting at the end of November at Rennes, some 200 students representing 27 striking universities formulated a resolution for a national platform. It included demands for free education, freedom of religion, democracy, and education accessible for all without conditions of nationality.

The coordination demands better financial support, because

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100,000 students are living under the poverty line with 48 percent of them forced to work to finance their studies. It also demands higher funding, a plan for students' accommodation and better conditions for handicapped students. It is appealing to the general assemblies of the other universities to join the strike movement. Representatives of German, English and Italian universities participated in the discussions.

Algerian government to sack striking teachers

Algeria's Education Minister Boubekeur Benbouzid said that his government would take legal action against 16 leaders of the teachers' unions and begin sacking teachers immediately if they did not end their eight-week-old strike over pay.

The government is said to be replacing teachers who refuse to return to work with university graduates. It claims that most teachers have now returned to work, although the unions, the National Council of Secondary and Technical Education Professors (CNAPEST) and the Council of Algiers Secondary Schools (CLA), deny this. *Le Matin*, the Algerian newspaper, said that in the capital Algiers 20,000 teachers, 35 percent of the total, were still on strike and were now threatened with the sack.

The strike began on October 14, with the unions, neither of which are legally recognised, rejecting a government pay increase of 5,000 dinars (around €55) a month. Currently a teacher of more than 10 years' experience is paid 10,000 dinars (€112) a month, only 2,000 dinars above the national minimum wage. Presidential elections are only five months away and the government fear that the strike could spread throughout the public sector.

Kenyan tea pickers protest low wages

Over 3,000 workers from 11 tea estates in Kiambu, Kenya, went on strike to demand the right to join trade unions and to be granted legally recognised terms of employment. They marched through the local town of Limuru. At present they earn Sh3.89 per kilogramme of picked tea leaves, making about Sh116.7 ($US1.53) for an average 30 kilogrammes per day. Unionised workers are earning about 20 percent more than this based on a collective bargaining agreement reached four years ago. The workers said that no statutory deductions for National Social Security or National Hospital Insurance were taken from their wages and that many of them had been employed on a casual basis for more than five years, whereas the legal maximum is three months.

Striking Kenyan council workers face sack

Some 1,500 council workers in Mombasa, Kenya, will be sacked this week for taking strike action deemed to be illegal by the local city council. The council have taken the strike action of 3,700 local government workers as an opportunity to drastically reduce their workforce following a retrenchment policy ordered by the Ministry of Local Government. They intend to cut their payroll, currently Sh50 million a month, by Sh14 million (Sh1 million = $US13,080).

The strikers are demanding seven-month salary arrears of Sh70 million plus their November salaries. Garbage in the city has begun piling up as the Town Clerk Rashid Mwakiwiwi held talks with Kenya Local Government Workers' Union officials in an attempt to resolve the dispute.

Kenyan lecturers remain on strike

Lecturers at Kenya's six state universities are continuing their strike that began November 10. Their union, the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU), is now asking churches, former university graduates and donor agencies to assist the strikers during the Christmas period.

Because of the strike action their November salary payments were between Sh7,000 and Sh18,000 (Sh1,000 = $US13). Education Minister George Saitoti has refused to meet with the union to discuss their case until they call off the action. More than 200 members of the UASU Kenyatta university chapter called for Saitoti to be sacked. UASU national chairman John Nderitu said, "We are ready to go on strike until February and beyond if the government will treat us with contempt as it is doing."

Dr Nderitu said that Saitoti had received the salary proposals report from the Kenya Institute of Public Policy and Research, but had refused to reveal its contents. UASU has now appealed directly to Kenyan President Kibaki to help start up negotiations on their demands. The lecturers' claim is 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.

Primary school teachers barricade offices in Lagos

Thousands of primary school teachers in Lagos, Nigeria, barricaded the state secretariat to protest non-payment of their salaries, leave bonus and pension arrears. Protesters told the press that the state government had refused to pay their allowances and a 10 percent salary increment previously agreed. Only one week before 500 retired primary school teachers carried out a similar protest over five years unpaid pension arrears. Teachers only called off their protest when they were addressed by the Governor, Bola Tinubu, who agreed to look into their complaints.

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