

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

13 December 2003

Temporary art workers continue protests in Paris

On December 8, up to 8,000 temporary art and cultural workers demonstrated in Paris, France, against the cuts in their unemployment assurance scheme. The struggle has now entered its sixth month and has found widespread support in the French population.

The demonstration was organised by the CGT union, supported by Force Ouvriere and the "Coordination of temporary workers and precarious of Ile-de-France." Protesters chanted slogans such as "Health, culture, education, the same struggle!"

Civil servants in Northern Ireland walk out in pay conflict

Thousands of civil servants across Northern Ireland struck on December 11 in a pay dispute. The workers are members of the NIPSA public-sector trade union. The organisation estimated that 20,000 of its members participated.

A number of government and public services were affected by the one-day strike, including 9 out of 15 vehicle test centres. The action also saw the closure of road tax offices in Armagh, Ballymena, Enniskillen and Londonderry, and a reduced service operated in the Belfast office with no tax discs being issued.

Ian Pearson, the minister for finance and personnel, described the government's pay offer of a 3.7 percent increase as "fair and reasonable." The union countered this claim by stating that senior civil servants have been given pay increases of between 4 and 9 percent.

England: Baggage handlers at Liverpool John Lennon Airport strike

On December 8, 120 baggage handlers employed at Liverpool John Lennon Airport held a strike in a pay dispute. The staff walked off the job in the first of a planned series of five three-day strikes.

The strike followed a breakdown in talks between airport management, the GMB trade union and the official conciliation service Acas. Management intends to cut the pay of a quarter of the handlers by up to 40 percent. Defending the pay cut, the airport said it was required in order to remain competitive. On December 10, the workers rejected a new offer by management proposing to reduce the pay cut to 20 percent.

Printing workers in Lancashire, England, strike

Printing press workers in Lancashire struck on December 4 in a pay dispute. The workers are employed by Goss Graphic Systems in the town of Preston.

The strike began following the breakdown of talks between management and the Amicus trade union. The union authorised the strike when a proposed 2 percent pay rise was withdrawn by the company. The company's senior vice president, Shane Lancaster, argued, "Our worldwide market has slowed significantly at present because customers are understandably cautious about spending money on new presses." He threatened that "the industrial action will make it more difficult for us to preserve jobs."

Britain's postal workers union attempts to prevent industrial action in run-up to Christmas

The Communications Workers Union (CWU) in England said this week that it would ensure strike action did not take place in the run-up to the holiday period. Postal staff around the UK held a series of unofficial strikes during October and had called for two 24-hour walkouts in London during December in the ongoing dispute over pay.

Postal workers in the capital are supporting a campaign to increase the capital city cost-of-living London weighting allowance to £4,000. Dave Ward, deputy general secretary of the CWU, said, "The capital's postmen and women know the public rely on us through the year, but especially at Christmas. We're not going to let them down."

The union is currently involved in negotiations with Royal Mail over mail delivery schedules and other changes aimed at increasing productivity. Royal Mail said previously that it would not increase its offer of a £300-a-year increase in London weighting allowances.

Office staff at Nissan auto plant in northeast England votes to strike

On December 9, workers at the Nissan car plant on Wearside in the northeast of England voted to take strike action in protest at a decision by the firm to relocate its purchasing department from the factory in Sunderland to a site in Cranfield, Bedfordshire. The workers, members of Amicus, voted 17 to 5 in favour of industrial action. Were a strike to be held, it would be the first industrial action at the plant since it was opened in 1986.

South African medical laboratory workers strike

Laboratory workers in South Africa's National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) began strike action this week over a salary claim. James Kruger, the Western Cape coordinator of the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU), reported that the employers had unilaterally imposed a 4 percent pay rise whilst the union's claim is 8.5 percent. Kruger said, "Essential services such as tests for TB and HIV AIDS are disrupted, and 60 percent of workers are out on strike."

CEO John Robertson claimed that only 10 percent of the workforce were on strike, and that the NHLS salary package was equivalent to that awarded to the public sector as a whole. He said that some workers had received only 4 percent because they were already paid above the public-sector rate.

A spokesman for NEHAWU said that it had made clear from the start that it expected an across-the-board pay rise and not just the amelioration of salary disparities. Management was now telling workers they could get only get the parity increases if they resigned from the union.

Mozambique demonstration attacked by police

About 1,500 workers made redundant by a state-owned cashew processing company, CCA, were attacked by police when they marched through the streets of Angoche in the northern Mozambican province of Nampula. Three marchers were injured.

The workers attempted to march to the district agriculture and labour directorates and were blocked by the police. They were planning to confront Alfredo Gamito, a parliamentary deputy for the ruling Frelimo party, who was secretary of state for the cashew industry in the 1980s before CCA was sold off to the Gani Commercial company. The workers had been told by Gamito that they would be able to keep their jobs after privatisation.

The secretary of the agricultural and forestry workers union, Abudo Tauacale, said that the workers' action was illegal. A government commission had been set up with representatives from the union and Gani management to look into the matter. He admitted the process had been slow, that they were supposed to receive a document on the privatisation of the company, but that the workers had also failed to produce documents showing their situation. This would then enable compensation to be paid, Tauacale claimed. The workers have been demonstrating for four months. Gani claims that only 100 workers were on the books when it took over from CCA, and it refuses to employ the remainder.

School teachers on strike in Mali

Teachers in state schools in Mali went on a two-day strike this week for higher salaries and better working conditions.

They are also demanding payment of salary bonuses and arrears, the harmonisation of pay scales for all public service employees, and the integration of part-time teachers into the public service.

The strike covers the whole of the education sector from nursery to the higher education level. It began after negotiations between the union and the government broke down on December 8. The strike is one of a series in the public sector in Mali. Teachers in the higher education sector, including Mali's only university, recently took action, but went back to work after the government promised to review their terms of employment. Before that, workers in the public sector went on a two-day strike over salaries and working conditions. They accused the government of President Amadou Toumani Toure, elected in April 2002, of failing to keep promises made during the electoral campaign.

Zimbabwean doctors' trial begins

Seven executive members of the Hospital Doctors Association (HDA) went on trial on December 9 in the Harare Magistrates' Court. They are accused of organising a strike of junior- and middle-level doctors who provide an "essential service" and are therefore alleged to have contravened the Labour Relations Act. The accused doctors include HDA president Phibion Manyanga, Vice President Akim Mashoko, Tapuwa Musuka, Toziveyi Muchenje, Leolin Katsidzira, Onesai Chihaka and Tinashe Kanyowa.

According to the pro-government newspaper, *The Herald*, "It is alleged that on a date unknown to the State, the seven doctors from major referral centres resolved to go on an unlawful collective job action in support of their salary claim. The strike began in October and when the Labour Court issued a court order on November 7 demanding a return to work, the striking doctors refused to comply, demanding a written undertaking from their employer, the Public Service Commission that their grievances would be addressed."

Nurses at some Zimbabwean referral centres initially joined the strike, but returned to work in early November on the strength of a promise from the government to review their salaries. Three weeks later, on November 22, they came out on strike again. The referral centres affected by the action are being staffed by senior doctors, health staff from the armed forces and student nurses.



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