

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

19 December 2003

Railworkers in Italy strike

On December 13 railway workers employed by the state rail network Trenitalia struck for 24 hours throughout Italy, resulting in approximately half of all railway routes being closed.

The strike is to protest contracts agreed earlier in the year and to demand clearer stipulations on wages and job protection. Trenitalia announced that 40 percent of medium and long-term trains were cancelled over the course of the 24-hour stoppage, which began at 9:00 p.m. An estimated 55 percent of local trains were cancelled throughout the country.

Transport staff in Italy hold day of action in contract dispute

Transport workers throughout Italy held a day of action on December 15. During the morning of the strike a record number of calls requesting sick leave were taken. According to estimates some 60 percent of workers called in sick in Turin, Naples, Genoa, Brescia, Cosenza, Catanzaro and Castrovillari. The “sick day” was organised by a number of transport unions who described the form of strike as “just and fully legitimate”.

The unions issued a statement explaining that the day of action is seen by the bureaucracy as a means of letting off steam and controlling the anger felt by workers. It was described as “a strong response to dissatisfaction concerning current negotiations, which promise to issue in an unsatisfactory agreement that does nothing to address drivers’ basic expectations; the strike was approved in order to wind the protest and to lower the stakes when an agreement is reached. Limiting democracy and strengthening counter-strike laws will prove counterproductive. When people are denied the right to fight for their rights—when they are truly threatened—then clearly no amount of legislation will stem the workers’ tide of anger.”

Fishermen and Seafarers end strike in Calais

Seamen employed by SeaFrance ended a strike on December 13 that had resulted in blockades and protests, thousands of P&O and SeaFrance ferry passengers being stranded and hundreds of lorries held up in traffic jams in both Dover in England and Calais, France.

The action was organised the day after a fishermen

blockaded the port of Calais in protest over European Commission quotas. The strike held by 1,200 SeaFrance workers was over proposed changes to employment law and plans to deregulate the merchant shipping industry that threatens jobs and safety conditions. Britain’s P&O succeeded in getting a court injunction against the strikers, but claimed that French authorities did not enforce it.

The UK Freight Transport Association said that the fishermen’s strike resulted in more than 40 ferry cancellations, costing British industry more than £1 million.

Health practitioners in France protest

The Federation of Health Practitioners (FPS) in France held an action day this week. It mainly consisted of general assemblies of staff held at a number of main hospitals. The FPS has called for a national day of strikes and demonstrations to be held on January 22. A further 15 organisations of practitioners, specialists, trade unions and political organisations including the Socialist Party, Communist Party and the Green Party have decided to join the movement, as well as the CGT trade union’s chemical branch.

Transport workers in Manchester, England set to strike

Tram and bus drivers in Manchester in the north west of England are to take strike action over the holiday period in separate disputes.

Stagecoach bus drivers are to hold industrial action over the weekend of December 20-22 in a dispute over pay. The tram drivers employed by Metrolink are to strike in a series of 24-hour stoppages to demand trade union recognition.

The bus workers strike has been called by the Transport and General Workers’ Union and will result in the cancellation of 90 percent of the companies’ bus services. The drivers have taken the decision to strike following their rejection of an 18-month 7.1 percent paydeal. The tram drivers are members of the ASLEF trade union, and voted on December 16 to strike. Dates for industrial action have not yet been finalised.

London Underground staff to strike to demand co-worker is reinstated

This week the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) announced that its members on a section of the London

Underground (LU) tube system would hold two further strikes on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve as part of a dispute to reinstate a sacked driver, Chris Barrett. The strikes will affect the Hammersmith & City and Circle Lines. The Circle Line is normally used by 230,000 passengers a day, while the Hammersmith & City line carries 162,000 people daily.

Barrett was sacked by LU after a company spy filmed him leaving a squash court while he was on sick leave. Barrett had injured his ankle and his doctor told him to work out in the gym, jog and play squash in order to help its repair. He produced two letters from his doctor and one from his sports injury therapist that confirm this claim, but LU had their own doctors proclaim that he would have made his injury worse without making any examination or seeing his medical records.

LU management admits spying on one in three workers who are off sick. LU has found support from London Mayor Ken Livingstone, who added, "I am only surprised he was allowed to get away with it for so long."

Striking Kenya lecturers threatened with sack

University lecturers on strike now for two months over their pay claim have been told they will be sacked if they do not return to work. About 1,000 lecturers at the University of Nairobi and 600 lecturers at Egerton have been told their contracts will be terminated this month if they refuse to return to work. No details are reported on the other four state universities involved in the dispute, Kenyatta, Moi, Jomo Kenyatta and Maseno.

The lecturers' union, the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) is claiming that the government is now paying out bribes to persuade lecturers to break ranks and return to work. UASU Deputy Secretary General Dr Muga Kolale said that about Sh5 million had been set aside by the government and that intelligence officers and top officials were quietly attempting to persuade strikers to return. "This money was disbursed after all avenues to stop the strike failed. They should be told that we are not cheap to be bribed with cheap money; we are people of integrity," said Kolale.

He accused some University of Nairobi lecturers of having agreed to distribute the money.

UASU Secretary General Charles Namachanja said that university authorities could not negotiate pay deals and call off the strike without the agreement of national officials of the union. He was referring to a meeting, apparently negotiating on the dispute, between vice-chancellors and university officials and the Education Ministry. UASU is calling for salaries ranging from Sh159,000 a month for lecturers to Sh890,000 for professors compared to Sh17,000 to Sh31,000 at present (Sh1,000=\$US13).

More striking doctors arrested in Zimbabwe

Ten Zimbabwean doctors have been arrested as they attended the trial of seven colleagues who are being prosecuted for organising a strike in an essential service.

Molefi Ndlovu, a doctor who escaped arrest, told reporters, "When our colleagues appeared before the magistrate, we also came in and settled in the public gallery, but no sooner had we settled down than the police pounced on us.

"We don't know how they identified us, but that is what happened. Some doctors tried to resist but the police dragged them, huffing and puffing into their van."

The strike is in support of an 8,000 percent pay increase which doctors say they need to keep pace with runaway inflation. Junior and middle level doctors currently earn \$Z4.5 and \$Z5.7 million (about \$US5,641 and \$Z6,917) a year. Initially doctors demanded their pay was increased to \$Z30 million (about \$US36,407). They have since reduced this demand to \$Z4 million.

It is also about conditions in the hospitals. One of the arrested doctors told the court, "We went on strike because we feel our working conditions and conditions of service have become hazardous to both the patients and to ourselves. We are suppose to wear protective clothing like gloves, masks and work under good lighting conditions especially in theatres and in the casualty ward ... gloves, masks and gowns are required since dangerous drugs such as cytotoxic are administered to the patients. If the drugs spill on you, you can become permanently blind or physically handicapped."

The government has threatened all striking medical personnel with the sack. Nurses who briefly returned to work after beginning a strike have now come out on strike again.



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