

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

23 January 2004

## French rail workers strike

On January 20, rail workers employed by the state rail firm SNCF took strike action for 24 hours.

The strike was the latest in a dispute over a pay offer and planned job cuts. It was called by trade unions at the company, which employs 180,000 workers and plans to shed 3,500 jobs this year. The company also announced that wages would only be increased by one percent.

A further element in the dispute is the announcement of a serious attack on the right to strike in the transport sector, as the government and SNCF are proposing a law regarding an obligation to a “minimal service” during industrial action if negotiations fail to produce agreement within six months. This legislation had been proposed during the election campaign of President Jacques Chirac, but has been postponed by the Raffarin government on several occasions. The strike was not an all-out dispute as the trade unions guaranteed that in the different regions, mainly the Paris region, a certain percentage of trains would run.

During the first evening of the strike all domestic night trains were cancelled, only 10 to 35 percent of trains ran in the Paris region in the morning and there were traffic jams of 180 km around Paris. The inter-regional trains ran at half normal capacity. In Toulouse only three percent of normal TER services ran. International connections from France ran at about 80 to 90 percent of normal schedules.

## Workers at Gaz de France and Electricité de France strike

On January 20 workers in the French state energy sector held a strike against the intended privatisation of gas and electricity supply.

In December 2003 the European Union had demanded the French government carry through privatisation in the industries at the latest in 2004. Prime Minister Raffarin is expected to introduce the statutory changes on July 1, after the regional elections. That is the date for the opening the European energy market to competition. The workers fear that their social gains are threatened by the privatisation.

Some 50 percent of workers at the companies took part in the strike and 1,000 demonstrated in Paris. In most regions assemblies were held and leaflets were distributed in the streets. At Tulle, Limoges, Le Puy and Montlucon energy workers established connections to the power supply system for customers who had been cut off for not paying their bills. In some regions the tariff was changed to the advantage of the electricity users.

## Midwives of public Paris hospitals hold strike

Midwives at public Paris hospitals staged a strike on January 19 against changes to their emergency service regulations. More than 80 percent took part, with some of the nurses obliged to continue work to provide a minimum service.

The same organisations also held a strike on December 16. Further industrial action was also announced to be held on January 22 against

the permanent deterioration of working conditions and ongoing cuts at the supply of services. The “plan Hospital 2004” signifies a reform of budget including the charging for certain services, a new working hours organisation and new practices regarding nomination of staff in health service leadership.

## Britain’s civil servants to hold 48-hour strike

Civil servants in the UK are to hold a 48-hour strike on January 29 and 30. Employees in the Department for Work and Pensions, Home Office, Prison Service, Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Treasury Solicitors voted in separate ballots to take industrial action.

The strike has been called by the Public and Commercial Services Union in a dispute with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) over pay. It will affect government services such as courts, immigration services, job centres and benefit offices. The action is set to be followed by a series of overtime bans and staff implementing work to rule.

The Department of Work and Pensions said that it had made what it considered to be a “substantial” pay offer that it claimed was worth an average five percent.

## Alitalia airline staff in Italy stage strike

On January 19 workers at Italian airline Alitalia held an eight-hour strike, forcing the cancellation of 364 flights and the rescheduled of a further 64. The staff is in dispute over the airline’s plan to lay off some 2,700 employees as part of an overall restructuring operation.

## Iraqi oil workers threaten shut down strike

Oil workers in Iraq’s second city, Basra, are threatening to join electricity workers, already on strike, in order to “Shut down Iraq” if their wages aren’t corrected.

Vice President of the Basra Federation of Trade Unions, Samir Hanoon, said, “In general, for the lives of people living in Basra, electricity is more important than food and water. After our discussions with unions in the oil section, we know we are capable of a total shutdown. Our problem is not with the General Directors and managers—it is with Bremer and the occupation.”

Hanoon also said he was conscious that “ex-regime people” were still active and that they may attempt to use the strike to serve their own ends. “They may sabotage it and the benefit will be to the Occupation Forces. We have to be careful in studying what will affect the existence of the occupation forces, not the things that will affect or harm the Iraqi people.”

Last month oil workers throughout Basra announced the formation of their own wage-table, challenging the occupation government’s minimum wage for a public sector worker set at 69,000 Iraqi Dinar (\$US40)—less than half the average monthly wage of a sweatshop worker in a free trade zone in neighbouring Iran or Jordan.

Workers have set their proposed minimum salary at approximately

155,000 ID per month. The strike threat was backed up with a threat by workers to join the armed resistance if occupation troops were called in to take over the pumps.

### **Israeli schools strike threat**

The Union of Local Authorities (ULA) renewed its January 21 threat to strike in Israel's schools. The stoppage would mean a halt to work by security guards at schools and nursery schools. The Education Ministry forbids operating schools without guards.

At the end of December, the local authorities paralysed the school system for a day, to protest cuts of NIS 0.5 billion in the education budget.

### **Israeli Treasury establishes team to prevent municipalities strike**

The Israeli Finance Ministry announced January 21 the creation of a special team to head off the planned strike by the country's local authorities expected to begin on February 1.

Earlier that day local authorities had decided to begin a strike of their services protesting proposed cuts to their budgets. Basic education services will not be provided, municipal buildings will not be manned, welfare offices and youth and cultural centres will be empty. Garbage collection will also be halted.

On January 18 over 7,000 protesters turned out to voice their opposition to the continued cuts in the budgets of local municipalities. The local authorities' campaign headquarters plans to hold protest vigils outside the treasury every few days, each time representing two different municipalities. Employees of the Kiryat Malakhi municipality demonstrated outside Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Negev ranch. One worker was arrested.

### **Nigerian general strike**

A nationwide strike partially went ahead in Nigeria on January 21 despite a court ban. The strike had been called in protest at an increase in petrol tax.

On January 20 a court insisted that the government postpone the tax increase and ordered the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) to call off the strike. President Olusegun Obasanjo appeared on television to announce that the government would obey the court order, but the rise in petrol prices still went into force the next morning.

Since Obasanjo ignored a similar deal last year many workers were suspicious of the government's intentions. Even though the NLC called off the action bank workers and civil servants went out on strike. Airports were closed.

The tax rise was equivalent to about one cent, but it followed a 35 percent increase in petrol prices last year when Obasanjo removed subsidies in line with IMF demands.

The tax increase has become the focus for widespread opposition to the government's social and economic policies. Opposition leaders are calling for the government to halt its programme of privatisation and deregulation, to prosecute corrupt officials, build more refineries for domestic use, stop sacking public sector workers, cut university fees, provide unemployment benefits and to stop its attacks on journalists and opponents of the regime.

### **Kenyan tea pickers strike**

Tea pickers in Kenya have gone on strike in an attempt to force their employers to pay an increase that an industrial court ordered three months ago.

Members of the Kenya Tea Growers Association have implemented the 13.5 percent rise, but other employers who are not members of the association have refused.

### **Signs that Kenyan government will renege on pay promise**

Kenyan university lecturers called off their two-month strike last week, but the government is holding up talks on a new pay deal.

The Kenya Institute of Public Policy and Analysis has recommended a 600 percent pay rise for lecturers. The report recommends that tutorial fellows now paid Kenyan shillings 34,015 (£240) should get KES 122,135 (£862). Full professors on KES 71,060 (£501) should get KES 473,382 (£3,345/\$6,000).

So far the government has refused to put any proposals on the table. Government negotiators say that they want lectures to resume before they will put forward concrete proposals. They suspect that the government will then abandon the talks and make them a take it or leave it offer.

### **Nigerian school teachers strike**

Primary school teachers in Bayelsa, Nigeria have gone on strike. They say that they have not received their leave allowances for last year. They are also protesting about the treatment of teachers in the Southern Ijaw Local Government Area, whose salaries for 2001 were stolen. Teachers in the Sagbama Local Government Area did not receive their salaries for August 2003. Schools in the state capital of Yenagoa were said to be deserted except for security guards.

### **Evictions on Namibian farms**

The Namibia Farm Workers' Union (Nafwu) has clashed with the mainly white commercial farmers Namibia Agricultural Union (NAU) over the eviction of six farm workers. What began as a labour dispute has flared into a conflict over land reform

Nafwu's general secretary Alfred Angula said, "If they are committed to land reform in Namibia, we are challenging them to start sharing the land they are occupying in the interests of all Namibians, for us all to enjoy the resources of this country."

His comments follow the eviction of six farm labourers from Ongombo West Farm 50 km northeast of Windhoek. The workers had been sacked but the management had agreed not to evict them from their homes while an industrial court considered the case.

### **South African baggage handlers sacked**

Members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union employed by Equity Aviation Services have been told to reapply for their jobs after they went on strike over a pay dispute.

The union is threatening to bring the country's airports to a standstill by driving cars around them. Police have set up road blocks in an attempt to prevent this action.

### **UK based charity accused of not paying workers**

Ockenden International, a British based non-governmental organisation, has been accused of not paying some of its Kenyan workers. The NGO recently pulled out of the West Nile region and admits that it left debts. Local workers have seized computers, motorbikes and a truck. Former programme coordinator Frances Alesi told reporters that the workers intend to sue the NGO for unpaid allowances.



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