

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

30 January 2004

Civil servants strike in the UK

On January 29, some 20,000 civil servants in four government departments began a two-day strike in separate pay disputes.

Staff including court ushers and clerks are involved in the stoppage in England and Wales. The action has been called by the Public and Commercial Services union.

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, with majorities ranging from 54 percent to 63 percent. The move follows workers' rejection of several pay offers by the civil service.

A planned strike by 86,000 civil servants in the Department of Work and Pensions was postponed for at least two weeks by the union. Following the 48-hour strike, workers are to hold overtime bans and a work to rule.

Black cab makers in England walk out over pay dispute

Workers employed manufacturing black cabs in the UK have begun strike action in a pay dispute. The workers are employed at London Taxis International in Coventry in the West Midlands, England.

The indefinite action began on January 27 after the workers, members of the Transport and General Workers Union, rejected a 2.9 percent pay increase offered by the company. Several strikers mounted a picket outside the LTI's plant on Holyhead Road.

The stoppage has halted all current production at the plant. LTI has stated that it already has enough vehicles stockpiled to meet current demand. Between April 2001 and 2002, the company made a pre-tax loss of £2.9 million. This compared to a £3 million loss the previous year, on a turnover of £119 million.

LTI exports to more than 25 countries in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and South-East Asia.

IT staff in Bradford strike against privatisation

On January 27 information technology staff at Bradford Metropolitan District Council in West Yorkshire, England voted to strike against the planned privatisation of their department.

The workers voted 91 percent for industrial action on a turnout of 81 percent. They claim that the council has breached consultation procedures and refused to negotiate staffing issues. The strike is set to begin this week and will affect many services such as council tax collection and processing, email and telephone services.

The council plans to offer a ten-year, £100 million contract covering all the IT services provided by the council by March to one of 3 firms—Atos KPMG and Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, with a joint bid coming in from IBM and ITNet.

IT outsourcing in the public sector has increased dramatically in the UK over the past few years. In 1997 it accounted for 19 percent of outsourcing revenues in the UK, but by 2006 is set to increase to 29 percent.

Public Service workers strike in Portugal

The 700,000 workers employed by the Portuguese public service (15 percent of the working population) held a general strike on January 23.

There was a broad participation, including 80 to 90 percent of teachers. Some 150 schools were closed. There were also strikes at other sectors, such as financial administration, airports, refuse collection, justice and local administrations.

The strike was called to protest against the fall in the real value of wages. The government has refused to negotiate with the unions regarding new wages contracts and the reform of the pensions system. It intends to increase only the wages of staff that are paid less than 1,000 euros per month by two percent this year and give no rise to those earning more than 1,000 euros. It is expected that inflation will reach three percent this year.

Paris airports workers strike

Employees at the Paris airports Orly and Roissy (ADP) held a day of protest against the privatisation of ADP, projected for 2005, on January 22. According to airport management 19 percent of staff participated in the strike. One thousand workers demonstrated the same day between the Paris headquarters of the ADP and the Ministry of Transports at Boulevard Saint-Germain.

Hospital workers protest staff cuts in France

Seven unions in the health sector called a protest held on January 22 against staff cuts, for an increase in the health service budget and the cancellation of the "Hospital 2007" plan. This proposes new management methods, reduction of services, a downgrading of working conditions and cuts in public health service capabilities.

In Paris 22,000 people demonstrated behind the slogan "Security for the patients, enough staff! A public health service for all!" At Lille 1,000 demonstrated and a further 500 participated in the demonstration at Bordeaux and at Marseille. Demonstrations also took place at Nantes, Saint-Nazaire, Tours, Caen, Lyon, Toulouse.

The "Hospital 2007" project is criticised by the medical staff as representing the start of the privatisation of hospital care. The doctors unions INPH and CHG that called the protests represent 75 percent of the medical hospital practices. The minority health unions CMH and SNAM-HP have already agreed to the government's plan, as have the hospital management organisations.

The union's calling the action are doing so only in order to strengthen the position of the bureaucracy and not based on principled opposition. They are demanding negotiations on "demographic questions, staff numbers, formation (educational questions), statutory and financial problems."

Strike spreads across Israeli education sector

Local council workers across Israel will stage strike action at all educational institutions, except special education facilities, on February 1. The strike is in protest at the non-payment of salaries owed to workers in many local and religious types of council.

Although, the country's two teaching unions have said that they will not take part in the strike, union spokesmen said that if no maintenance, administrative and security personnel report to work, classes will not be held.

The head of the National Union of Clerical, Administrative, and Public Service Employees, Leon Morozovsky, told 150 delegates from local councils and religious councils at a meeting, January 26:

“A strike is to be held each day, each time in another sector of local council activity, until we reach a stage when garbage isn’t collected and all services to residents come to a standstill.... A government that violates a signed agreement relating to assistance to local councils should be disbanded.”

Histadrut (Israeli federation of labour) Chairman MK Amir Peretz said, “The non-payment of wages to thousands of local council and religious council workers is a virus that’s liable to turn into an epidemic.”

Histadrut has agreed a series of strikes and disruptions in all the local authorities over the next two weeks. Peretz called on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to intervene in the crisis. In a meeting with the Minister of Internal Affairs Avraham Poraz, he said, “The crisis in the local authorities would not have occurred had the government fulfilled its commitments to finance educational and welfare service.”

Among the grievances of the strikers are the NIS 1.5 billion cut in equalisation grants, the failure to pay the salaries of workers at 75 local authorities, and a NIS 700,000 cut in the education and welfare budgets.

UAE workers stage protest over non-payment of wages

Over 300 United Arab Emirates workers at a Dubai-based group of construction companies gathered at the Labour Ministry, January 20, to complain over non-payment of six months’ wages.

More than 50 of the labourers walked 17 kilometres to stage the protest at the labour ministry. Their journey from Al Ghusais to Abu Hail was on foot because they cannot afford transport. This is the fourth occasion that the workers have attempted to stage such a protest. Labour officials turned them away on January 14 and the employer failed to show up at the ministry last week. The workers left the ministry at midday, heading for their consulate to find it was closed.

The workers said that a similar problem was being faced by another 600 labourers who have also been waiting for their wages for several months. Bhanwar Lal Blai, a mason, said, “We were reduced to borrowing to buy food and accepting assistance from charity organisations. We ran out of money three months ago.”

Ahmed Darwish, chief legal consultant at the labour ministry, said, “When we feel that the employer is short of finances and he is willing to solve the problem but seek a grace period, we grant it....We are not in a position to refer every dispute to the court for our task is to solve them amicably.”

The labourers are also demanding annual leave payments for two years, and the sum of Dh2,000 they paid to their employer as a surety against absconding and the end-of-service gratuity. A spokesman for the workers said, “The ordeal of 900 workmen should not be reduced to just one unanswered complaint.”

Saleh Faraj, a human resources expert, said there are serious repercussions for the entire industry and business in the country if the labour ministry fails to take a grip of companies abusing their staff and breaking the rules. He warned, “The plight of workers is a ticking time-bomb as many of them may turn to illegal means to find work or even start stealing. They have no money and no access to another job. They can’t do anything to earn their living.... Giving the companies more time simply makes the workers more desperate for a solution and they are more likely to forego their entitlements.”

He reassured the ruling elite, stating that some workers have been known to accept a settlement of as little as a quarter of their dues just so they can avoid the lengthy process of a court battle.

Three-day strike by defence attorneys at UN Tribunal in Rwanda

Lawyers representing detainees at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), in Arusha, northern Tanzania, began a three-day strike on January 28.

According to the UN Integrated Regional Information Networks the action, which caused the adjournment of two trials, was in protest against “a serious deterioration” of the rights of the accused.

On the day before the strike began the Executive Committee for the Representation of Defence Counsels issued a statement accusing the tribunal’s Defence Management Section of “intemperate decisions” which had reduced the defence’s liberty of action. “It is, therefore, the very sense of the mission bestowed on the defence which is now perverted,” it read.

The tribunal was set up in November 1994 by the UN Security Council to try those accused of “genocide and other serious violations of international humanitarian law” committed in Rwanda in 1994, when hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus were slaughtered.

Ingwe Colliery South Africa to sack 371 miners

On January 22, miners from the Ingwe Colliery in Witbank, Mpumalanga, staged a protest march through the streets of Johannesburg. They were demonstrating against impending sackings at the mine. Management have served 371 workers with redundancy notices, claiming the retrenchment is necessary because of rising value of the rand-dollar exchange rate which is restricting coal exports.

Derrick Elbrecht, the National Union for Mineworkers’ (NUM) national treasurer, accuses management of using the stronger rand as an excuse. The union has threatened an all-out strike if the sackings are not called off.

According to the South African Broadcasting Corporation, Eddie Scholt, the president and chief operating officer at the colliery, said that the rand-dollar exchange rate is not the only reason for the retrenchments. He refused to elaborate further and said that management would discuss the matter with the union.

Lightning strike over council workers’ pay delay in South Africa

Workers employed by the City of Cape Town walked out on strike on January 27 in protest against non-payment of their monthly salaries. Workers who tried to withdraw cash to pay their fares into work were shocked to find their wages had not been paid. Management blamed the problem on a newly installed computer system.

Cape Argus (Cape Town) reported a statement from André Adams, SA Municipal Workers Union provincial secretary, saying that the workers had downed tools to show their frustration. “Ever since this new multimillion-rand computer system went on line in August, we’ve had problems with salary payments.”

The response of the workers in taking strike action indicates their frustration and also the fact that they cannot afford any delay in the payment of salaries due to them, not even of 12 hours.



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