

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

7 February 2004

Teachers hold national strike in Macedonia

On January 26, an estimated 35,000 teachers took strike action in Macedonia. Teachers are demanding an increase in pay and transportation, meals, and holiday allowances.

Strikers attended schools but refused to teach any classes. Wage levels for teachers in Macedonia are barely at subsistence level and have been frozen at about 140 euros for the past 10 years. The Ministry of Education has opposed calls for a 5 percent increase as “unreasonable.”

French and German chemical staff protest restructuring and job losses

On February 2, workers employed by the German division of French drug maker Aventis ended their blockade of the factory in the Ile-de-France region, following its dispersal by the police.

The 150 workers have been on strike since January 7 in opposition to the plant’s takeover by chemical group PCAS, which has left the workers’ fate unclear. For several years, Aventis has dismissed thousands of workers and is at present dismantling the research centre at Romainville. It intends to merge with Sanofi-Synthelabo as part of a hostile takeover. The merger would threaten an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 workplaces worldwide. It would create a new drug conglomerate ranked third in terms of global sales behind US-based Pfizer and British-based GlaxoSmithKline.

On January 26, there was a joint assembly with delegations of other workers at Aventis enterprises in Ile-de-France. The workers demanded guarantees regarding their further employment.

Despite the end of the blockade, workers in France and Germany have continued the protests. On February 3, some 5,000 workers from the same German division of Aventis demonstrated in Hoechst, near Frankfurt, the location of the company’s major German plant. Some carried banners with slogans such as “Hands Off Aventis” and “Sa NO Fi” at a meeting called by local management. Aventis employs 70,000 workers worldwide, with 9,000 of these in Germany, mostly located in Hoechst.

Radio France journalists continue stoppage

Since January 27, journalists of Radio France have held a strike with participation of 65 to 90 percent at the different stations. It is the longest-running strike of journalists since 1994. The strikers are demanding an increase in their wages, as the “Servat plan” of 1994 stipulated that the wages of Radio France are to be set at the level of France Television’s journalists. It is the eighth year now that the Servat regulations were not adopted, and the wages have stayed at the same level.

The strike hit the news and information programmes of France Info, France Inter, France Bleu, France Culture, France Musiques, FIP and Le Mouv.

Tramways of Lyon, France, hit by strike action

On January 28, the CFDT trade union decided to continue the daily 55-minute strike at the Lyon tramways for another week. It demands a monthly premium of 150 euros for the tramway drivers. The strike movement began on January 12.

The transport organisation, the SLTC, refused to sanction such an

increase, which would signify a rise in wages of about 8 percent for the 2,400 drivers and would cost 6.5 million euros. The two lines transport 120,000 people a day.

French cigarette production workers begin indefinite strike

Cigarette workers at Altadis, Lille, began an indefinite strike on January 26, to protest plans by the French-Spanish group to shut the plant. Some 500 jobs would be lost. All production was halted, and no cigarettes left the blocked factory.

On January 23, to coincide with a general assembly of the central committee of the enterprise at Paris, a demonstration of hundreds of workers was held in different plants of Altadis. The CRS riot police carried out a violent attack on the demonstrators.

The management intends to close some 1,700 jobs by 2005. Seven-hundred of these will be in France, where six factories will be shut, and 1,000 in Spain.

The unions had demanded to present a study at the Paris general assembly showing that the Lille factory is the most profitable and nothing justifies closing it.

On January 30, a Lille court ordered the blockade of the factory to end, but the workers decided to continue their protest. It is expected that the strike will continue until February 20, the next meeting of the general committee of the enterprise.

Planned strike by airline staff in Sweden halted

Planned industrial action by Swedish employees of Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) set for January 6 has been cancelled following an agreement between the Swedish Air Transport Industry Employers Association and the Swedish Transport Workers Union on January 4. A deal was accepted by both parties regarding the 2003 contract for flight technicians, mechanics and baggage handlers.

For the SAS Group, the agreement entails a pay freeze for 2003 in line with SAS’s initial and unconditional demand. The deal also saw elements of the planned restructuring for 2004 terminated.

The dispute and the previous strikes held were in response to a planned merger by SAS of its domestic operations in Norway with Braathens. The merger will result in layoffs and will include pay cuts imposed on workers and a layer of management. SAS is set to announce the largest loss in its history.

Protesters killed by Iranian security forces

Iranian security forces and special guards attacked protesting workers at Nazkhaton’s Copper Smeltery in the city of Babak, Kerman Province on January 23, killing at least four and injuring dozens more. Unofficial reports have put the death toll as high as 15.

The workers were protesting against the company’s decision to lay off all their contract workers. Also caught up in the attack—which involved the use of military helicopters—were the families of protesting workers, including elderly women.

Many Iranian news agencies and newspapers covered the incident, and President Khatami was forced to send a delegation to investigate. The residents of the city continued their protests, despite the heavy presence of

army and special guards across the city.

There have been clashes with the security forces in different parts of the city, and scores of people have been arrested. Much of Babak was closed off as crowds gathered in front of the homes of the murdered workers demanding that those responsible be identified.

Israeli local authorities' strike escalates

The strike called last week by the Union of Local Authorities (ULA) is set to expand beyond education and social welfare and bring other local services such as refuse collection to a halt.

The strikers are fighting cuts worth NIS 670 million in the 2004 budget to education and social welfare. The strike is also protests the nonpayment of NIS 200 million in back pay owed by 79 local authorities.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has asked Finance Minister Benyamin Netanyahu and Interior Minister Avraham Poraz to hold urgent talks with ULA leaders in order to end the dispute. Next week's cabinet meeting will be devoted entirely to the crisis facing local authorities.

This week, the Histadrut trade union federation called a strike of pre-school workers, school administrative staff and service providers in local councils. The ULA joined in, sponsoring a strike of sanitation engineers at schools.

Protesters blocked traffic on main highways around the country by targeting 82 major junctions.

On February 2, the teachers' association said, "Teachers will bear the burden of the strike for one more day"—meaning that teachers would stop cooperating with directives from the Education and Interior Ministries to provide services like early morning security checks of school grounds that are not part of their teaching duties.

Religious council workers also stepped up industrial action this week. They have been engaged in several weeks of protests against delayed wage payments. The hours for burial services were shortened, and the issuing of kosher certificates to restaurants, hotels and banquet halls was suspended. Employees are not registering couples who plan to marry and have stopped the ritual slaughter of animals.

At an emergency meeting on February 2 at Histadrut headquarters in Tel Aviv, officials from the religious councils said that they were considering informing Jewish communities abroad that they are no longer supervising hotels in Israel. The Histadrut official responsible for religious councils, Shlomo Stern, said that at least 100 of the 153 councils have been unable to pay their workers on time for several months and that employer contributions to the National Insurance Institute have not been made.

A meeting between representatives of the ULA and Sharon's bureau chief Avigdor Yitzhaki—intended to help terminate the strike that started Sunday—ended Monday night without results. The ULA planned to suggest the government return budget-balancing grants to the levels they were at in 2002. If the proposal were accepted, NIS 2 billion would be added to the budget.

Early this week, the Finance Ministry transferred NIS 42 million to 56 different local authorities facing particularly harsh economic situations. However, ULA spokesman Avraham Cohen criticised the treasury decision, saying, "When the interior minister says the local authorities will collapse without an additional NIS 2 billion for the budget-balancing grants, the treasury's behaviour can only be seen as laughing at the poor."

The strike shut down schools in local councils, since sanitation, administrative, transportation and security services are not being provided to these institutions. The situation in cities is different. Since the country's two teacher associations have not joined the strike, classes can be held in urban schools—on the condition that security personnel be found for them. In local councils, where students depend on bus services to get to school, it is more difficult to hold classes during the strike.

In all but 15 of the 213 local and regional authorities, kindergarten teachers' assistants also boycotted work, and school cleaning and administrative staff joined the strike.

Migrant workers may be permitted to leave Saudi Arabia following hunger strike

On February 2 it was indicated that the first group of 16 Filipino workers who staged a hunger strike at the Philippine Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in December "may go home early next week," according to the Sangguniang Masang Pilipino, International (Filipino Grass Roots Forum).

The announcement comes after violent protests by Filipinos who picketed the office of Administrator Virgilio Angelo of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) last week. The Sangguniang Pilipino official said that the employers of the other strikers must be contacted in order to arrange exit visas for them.

The 16 strikers staged a hunger strike, demanding that the Philippine Embassy send them home. The group had run away from their employers, whom they accused of embezzlement, harassment, unpaid salaries and maltreatment including physical assault. When negotiations failed to end the strike, police were called to take the strikers from the embassy to a hospital for treatment. Some members of the group had health problems.

Nigerian textile workers demonstrate against factory closure

Workers at Kaduna Textiles Limited (KTL) have protested the closure of their factory and demanded payment of over N1 billion (\$7.2 million) arrears of salaries and other entitlements dating back to November 2001. Demonstrating at the company's premises at Kakuri, the workers carried placards such as "Obasanjo Save the Textile Industry" and "[Nigerian Labour Congress leader] Oshiomhole has disappointed us". Wordam Simdik, speaking for the affected workers, said that 137 of around 2,500 staff had died since the closure "as a result of non-payment of salaries."

KTL managing director Malam Aliyu Hikima responded to the demonstration by saying that there was a standing rule of "no work, no pay." He admitted that KTL had problems with its finances. The company is mainly state-owned, with the 19 Northern states' governments together owning 74 percent of KTL's shares.

Nigerian lecturers facing lockout

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) at the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), in Zaria, has announced that striking lecturers intended to return to work, but were told by the university authorities on January 27 that their decision was not acceptable.

The university has been closed since last October, following an industrial dispute over wages declared by the ASUU. The union called off the strike during the weekend of January 24-25, and urged the vice chancellor to recall the students and resume normal academic work.

ASUU national president Dr. Oladipo Fashina has written to Kaduna state governor Alhaji Ahmed Mohammed Makarfi, asking him to ensure that the ABU returns to normal. In his letter of January 22, Fashina warns of "apprehension among our members that the [ABU] administration is not really keen on re-opening the university."

Strikers arrested in South Africa

Thirty-seven workers were arrested at Cape Town International Airport on January 30 for taking part in a strike by baggage handlers. Those arrested belong to the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) and the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU). SATAWU provincial secretary Nicholus Maziya said they were arrested for attending an illegal gathering and for contravening the National Key Points Act that bans demonstrations near the airport. They were taken to Bellville police station.

Since January 19, the striking baggage handlers have been arriving at the airport between 5:30 and 6:00 each morning. The workers started their strike on December 18 following the failure of talks on pay. The unions are demanding an increase of 8 percent, but the baggage-handling firm Equity Aviation is offering only 3 percent.

Guinea-Bissau health sector strike

Doctors, nurses and hospital technicians took strike action for four days

in Guinea-Bissau this week over salary arrears and unpaid bonuses for the last five months. They were also protesting the poor quality of food given to patients. Hospitals were closed, many patients had to go home, and outpatients were turned away as only emergency services were covered. Negotiations between the two main health-sector trade unions and the government are continuing. The government of Guinea-Bissau is heavily in debt to the West and owes salaries, in some cases dating back for a year, to civil servants, teachers and health workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)