

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

14 February 2004

## Thousands of workers strike in Germany

Up to 90,000 workers organised in the IG Metall union held a short strike on February 5 as talks between the union and employers in the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg ended without agreement. Workers involved in the industrial action included those at BMW in Munich and Opel in Ruesselsheim, while workers from hundreds of other factories staged protests.

The negotiations in Baden-Wuerttemberg are traditionally the basis for the pay settlement in the rest of Germany, and talks are to resume on February 11.

IG Metall initially rejected the employers' offer of a 1.2 percent raise for manufacturing workers over a 15-month period starting January 1, to be followed by another 1.2 percent raise over the next 12 months. The union represents 2.56 million members and is calling for an increase of around 4 percent this year.

## French state radio journalists continue stoppage

The strike by French media workers has entered its third week, as state radio journalists and staff at the main television news programme demanded their salaries be realigned with the state television sector.

The action involves 600 staff at more than 50 stations in the public radio service and disrupted the 24-hour news channel *France Info* and the talk station *France Inter*. These make up 20 percent of the radio market. Also hit by the strike were the 42 branches of the regional *France Bleu* network.

Journalists from the *Radio France Internationale* (RFI), normally broadcasting around the world in 20 languages, also voted to join the strike this week.

The dispute arose when trade unions representing the journalists protested that *Radio France* and Culture Minister Jean-Jacques Aillagon broke a long-standing arrangement that linked the pay of radio and television journalists, leading to a 20 percent differential.

## Italian doctors and airline workers strike

On February 9, thousands of Italian doctors, health service staff and airline pilots held a one-day strike as part of ongoing industrial action against labour and pension reforms being introduced by the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

The action by the 150,000 health workers, including doctors, surgeons, chemists, biologists and administrators, protesting budget cuts and pay freezes meant only emergency care remained in operation. Veterinary surgeons also took strike action.

The stoppage by the pilots at national airline Alitalia resulted in the cancellation of up to 160 flights, including 99 domestic flights and 60 international services. The airline staff are protesting pay freezes and proposals by Alitalia to slash more than 2,500 jobs.

Further strikes by both groups of workers as well as action by judges and magistrates protesting judicial reforms are to be scheduled in the new few weeks.

## Greek drivers halt Olympic road works

On February 9, Greek truck drivers involved in a wage dispute

continued a three-day strike that threatens to hold up improvements to the Olympic marathon route. The drivers parked heavy machinery and caused traffic jams along portions of the 42-kilometre route between Athens and the ancient village of Marathon. The road is being widened and will provide access to seaside venues hosting rowing events and some media villages for the Olympic Games in August.

The workers are striking to demand backpay from the European Technical Company. The firm said it was unable to pay workers nearly 1 million euros because of problems with a bank.

## Italian steelworkers and students hold joint protest against job cuts

On February 6, steelworkers in Terni, Italy, held a protest march to the Ast steelworks of their employers, the Thyssen Krupp group. The workers were joined by more than 600 students who support the struggle to oppose Thyssen Krupp's shedding 900 jobs in the magnetic sector at the factory.

A large number of the students have parents or other relatives employed at the factory. Other students at the University of Perugia attended the protest wearing white overalls and placed a large banner on the facade of palazzo Spada, the city council. The banner showed the logo of Thyssen Krupp transformed into a bleeding skull. Another banner read, "We are wearing white, because we are invisible to German multinational Thyssen Krupp just like the factory workers of Ast."

## Civil servants in the UK to strike in pay struggle

More than 85,000 Job Centre and benefit offices staff in the UK are to take strike action on February 16 and 17 in a pay dispute. They are employed by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and will take action following the breakdown of talks between the DWP and the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

The trade union has said that the DWP is insisting on "unacceptable performance appraisals" for staff that are paid "poverty pay." The strike will affect the operation of pensions departments, Job Centres and the Child Support Agency.

The dispute began following the imposition of below-inflation pay rises before workers had voted on whether to accept them.

## Israeli Arab councils join national protests

On February 5, municipal workers and council heads from the 62 Arab local authorities throughout Israel joined the protest campaign against budgets cuts after the conclusion of the Id al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice) Muslim holiday.

Hundreds of employees took part in demonstrations at the Golani, Megiddo and Ahihad junctions in the north in the early hours. Roads were blocked on several occasions, causing traffic disruptions until the protestors dispersed. Many workers in the Arab sector have not been paid for up to 19 months.

The head of Yafia local council near Nazareth, Shawki Khatib, said, "The situation of the Arab local authorities is catastrophic and even worse than in the Jewish sector due to years of neglect, deprivation and discrimination since the establishment of the State."

Khatib is also head of the forum of Arab Council Heads and chairman of the monitoring committee of the Israeli Arab leadership, which is

composed of members of the Knesset (Mks), council leaders and prominent public figures.

The Arab councils have accumulated debts of over NIS 1 billion, and the accounts of many have been blocked by creditors, so they cannot pay salaries or provide proper services to residents.

Khatib explained, "Due to the low socioeconomic situation in the Arab sector, many residents are entitled to reductions or are even exempt from paying taxes. Our regular budgets are a lot lower than the allocations given to similar-size Jewish councils, so we have relied to a great extent on the balancing grants, which comprise 40 percent of our budgets."

It is the "balancing grants" given by the government to smaller local authorities to help bridge the gap between income and expenditure that the government has cut dramatically this year. Last year, the balancing grant for Yafia was NIS 14 million, and this is being cut to NIS 5.5 million.

The strikers, whom the Arab councils have joined, are fighting cuts in education and social welfare worth NIS 670 million in the 2004 budget. The strike also protests the nonpayment of NIS 200 million in back pay owed by 79 local authorities. The larger cities, such as Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa and Beer Sheva, have either now joined the strike wave or are pending decisions to join.

The strike began earlier this month. Many local services remain either closed or on skeleton service. All municipality services and offices serving the public will be closed, including garbage collection (garbage will be removed in Jerusalem, for security reasons), community centres, sports facilities, centres for the elderly, and welfare bureaus.

Some 231 local authorities are striking through a variety of sanctions protesting the non-payment of salaries. The strike has been joined by the National Union of Clerks. School officials and workers who man city emergency numbers are operating on emergency footing.

The Histadrut (labour federation) has brought all its workers out in industrial actions, including school janitors, administration clerks and assistant teachers in kindergartens—to protest the non-payment of wages in 79 local authorities.

#### **Nigerian teachers stage protest**

More than 300 teachers at primary school level in Delta State, Nigeria, held a protest over delays in payment of their monthly salaries and non-payment of transport allowances for the last two years. The teachers, all wearing black and carrying placards, barricaded the state assembly for three hours. They complained that although the money for the salaries and allowances was allegedly being sent from the Federal Government in Abuja, it was not reaching them. They have held prayers and fasted for three days, and stated that their protest was "to call down the hands of God upon wherever the monies are and hands that are seizing them."

The teachers passed a vote of no confidence in the leadership of the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) in the state, accusing the union of distorting facts and figures relating to the teachers' pay. They said, "We say that NUT has bitten the sole finger that has been feeding her. That primary school teachers' check-off dues to NUT be suspended forthwith for conniving to misappropriate primary school teachers leave transport grants for 2002/2003 respectively."

#### **Nurses on strike in Nigeria**

Nurses and other staff at the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital have been on strike during the last week over the non-payment of half of their December and January salaries and allowances.

Nurses also went on strike at the Federal Medical Centre (FMC) Owo, in Ondo State. Again the dispute is over a shortfall in their salary payments. The chief medical director of the hospital said their salaries had been affected by reduced funding from the federal government since 2002 and appealed for them to return to work in the interest of patients.

#### **Export Processing Zone dispute in Kenya**

Three-thousand textile workers, mainly women, at Emke EPZ Garments Ltd., Mombassa, Kenya, walked out on strike over their appalling pay and

conditions. They camped out in the factory compound with management refusing to talk to them. Firms setting up in the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) are given tax breaks by the government to attract foreign investment. The striking workers said the company's 600 permanent employees were being paid Sh120 [\$1.58] per day, and that casual employees earned between Sh140 [\$1.84] and Sh180 [\$2.37] per day.

Management failed to give them pay slips, and did not remit their monthly contributions to the National Social Security Fund and National Hospital Insurance Fund. Since the company started in 1994, they had refused to pay maternity leave and allowances, and those who took leave to give birth were sacked. There was no medical cover for employees.

Emke management refused to talk to the press, and journalists were kept away by security guards.

#### **Kenya lecturers upset by government offer**

Kenyan universities are likely to stay closed as lecturers were offered pay rises well below their expectations. The Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) is now consulting with its members after receiving proposals from the government that the lowest-paid lecturers would have their monthly salary increased from Sh14,015 [\$184] to Sh20,156 [\$265], and the highest-paid lecturer, a full professor, would have a salary increase from Sh31,060 [\$408] to Sh65,000 [\$855].

"The so-called salary increment is not only scandalous and contemptuous, but inciting to the entire academic fraternity in the country," said Charles Namachanja, the UASU secretary general.

Three months ago, the university lecturers went on strike over their poor pay, and only agreed to call off the dispute in January after a report from a government think tank—the Kenya Institute for Public Policy, Research and Analysis—had suggested substantial increases. However, the government delayed putting forward its proposals, and the universities failed to open for this year. Although one of the five state universities, the University of Nairobi, has said it will now re-open, the four others have yet to announce an opening date.



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