

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

27 February 2004

University staff and students protest in Britain

University staff and students throughout the UK have held nationwide protests over pay and the government's new legislation on top-up fees.

On February 25 thousands of lectures were cancelled as a result of student and staff protests, with over 100 educational institutions hit by the action. The protest was organised by the National Union of Students.

Earlier in the week members of the Association of University Teachers (AUT) in England and Wales took strike action over a pay dispute and new salary structure. Prior to the stoppage academics organised in the AUT rejected a pay rise of 3.44 percent this year and 3 percent next year. In a ballot of the AUT's 47,000 members with a 54.4 percent turnout, 66.6 percent supported strike action and 81.2 percent action short of a strike.

The lecturers are also protesting additional proposals to end nationwide pay negotiations and change the grades of some staff. The union has announced further "action short of a strike" next week, including a boycott on marking results and work associated with running exams.

University staff and students held joint picket lines, underlining their opposition to vice-chancellors' to change university staff pay structures and the introduction of tuition fees of up to £3,000 a year in 2006.

Rallies and demonstration were held in many towns and cities, including Birmingham, Manchester, Portsmouth, Leeds, Dundee and Edinburgh. The union reported that no lectures were held in many higher education facilities, including Leeds, Glasgow, Liverpool, Sussex and University College London, during the strike. Further strikes by AUT members are to be held on February 26 in Scotland and on February 27 in Northern Ireland.

On February 26 members of Natfhe, another lecturers' union, held a one-day strike over a pay package agreed last year but not implemented at some institutions.

Aer Lingus Irish cabin crew vote to strike

On February 24, Aer Lingus cabin crews in Ireland voted for strike action over the compulsory relocation of 29 staff from Shannon to Dublin. Over 93 percent voted to strike.

The Labour Relations Commission called on Aer Lingus management and union representatives for cabin crew and

pilots to discuss the dispute at a meeting on February 27. The vote follows another strike ballot by pilots at the airline two weeks ago in protest over plans that may result in some compulsorily redundancies. Some 46 pilots have been on full pay and offered no work since Aer Lingus recently sold off a number of aircraft that were surplus to requirements.

Romanian miners begin indefinite strike

Thousands of Romanian coal miners began an indefinite strike on February 23 to protest threatened job losses. The government plans to restructure mining by splitting the existing structure into five separate units, requiring 8,000 layoffs over the next two years.

The strike is expected to encompass 35,000 miners by the end of this week. A spokesman for the miners union said that 17,000 miners employed in Romania's major lignite basin (20 percent of the country's total) are currently taking industrial action. He said that the strike action would result in 100 billion lei (\$3.09 million) losses per day for the industry and would continue until the government implemented a "proper social package" for those made redundant.

Romania currently produces about two thirds of its power output in coal- and gas-fired power plants.

Israeli professors threaten to strike

Senior faculty at Israel's seven research universities declared a labour dispute February 24 over recommendations for structural changes that are scheduled to be discussed by the Council for Higher Education (CHE) in two weeks.

Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, Bar-Ilan, Haifa, Ben-Gurion, the Technion and the Weizmann Institute professors are threatening to strike if proposals by Shlomo Grossman, CHE's planning and budgeting committee chairman, are approved. Professors claim that the restructuring proposal constitutes surrender to the Finance Ministry, which is conditioning its continued financial support for the universities with the implementation of further cuts. The ministry contends that inefficient management at the universities is responsible for the NIS 500 million deficit.

A government decision in September 2003 requires higher learning institutions to move to a management system with a "clear hierarchy" of command, subordinated to the president of the institution. The president is to be appointed by a board of trustees or executive board selected by representatives of the

treasury and CHE. The president and executive board are supposed to select candidates for all senior positions at the universities, including rectors, deans, and department heads. The government decision also stipulates a 30 percent funding cut penalty for institutions that fail to impose these directives by the start of the 2004/2005 academic year.

Senior faculty members have argued that a system in which public figures, with their political and economic interests, determine who will fill senior academic positions and decide how resources are to be distributed within the university, would destroy academic freedom. Currently, there is a “dual system” at most universities, in which the president and executive board deal with macro-economic issues involved in managing the institution, while the rector and faculty senate make the academic decisions.

Zambia: workers suspended for strike action

Zambia Telecommunication Limited (Zamtel), a state run company, has suspended 26 workers for participating in last week’s one-day national strike when 500,000 workers marched on the Zambian parliament. Although the unions received police permission to hold the march, the Zambian government declared it illegal. The state-run Zambia National Commercial Bank also suspended 11 workers for taking part but agreed to reinstate them after the union intervened. Joyce Nonde, Federation of Free Trade Unions of Zambia (FFTUZ) president, said the unions were defending the Zamtel workers but there were reports that other workers throughout the country were receiving suspension notices.

Zambia’s unions held the one-day strike to protest the government raising income tax from 30 to 40 percent when inflation now stands at 17 percent, as well as freezing pay for civil servants. Last year the Zambian government was suspended from the International Monetary Fund’s poverty reduction and debt relief programme (HIPC) for overspending its budget, although it failed to pay the wage increases agreed with the public sector unions. The tax increase and pay freeze are being imposed as part of the IMF’s conditions for reaching the HIPC completion point. Zambia is heavily dependent on aid, with some 80 percent of the 10 million population living on less than \$1 per day.

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Terry Malama, vice-president of the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), said that workers had received promises when they brought the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) government to power in 1991, “But 12 MMD budgets have passed so far and we have not seen any fruits aimed at cushioning our suffering. For how long are we going to sacrifice?”

The ZCTU and FFTUZ have warned the government that demonstrations will continue, but say they are “committed and open to dialogue in efforts to move the country forward”.

After the one-day strike and protest Zambian President Levy

Mwanawasa announced that he would cut his annual \$6 million travel expenses by nearly half.

Troops fire on students in Central African Republic

French troops opened fire on protesting students in Bangui, the Central African Republic (CAR) capital, on February 18. The students were protesting because their bursaries had not been paid. Meanwhile, schoolteachers have been on strike because their salaries have not been paid for three months.

Government ministers and senior officials have taken a 30-percent pay cut in an attempt to reduce government expenditure. This followed a visit from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the African Development Bank (ADB). The delegation recommended major cuts in public spending, most of which will fall on the mass of the population. France sent troops into the CAR in support of General Bozizé, who overthrew Ange Felix Patassé in March 2003.

Namibian council workers strike over health care

Council workers at Arandis in Namibia went on strike on February 23 when they discovered that the council had not paid their medical contributions for the past four months.

Panduleni Haufiku, council shop steward and chairman of the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU) branch, said that it was a “matter of emergency. We cannot go without medical care.”

“Council tells us it is because of financial problems,” he continued. “This money is supposed to come from our salaries, how can they not subtract it? They are not allowed to use our money for council costs”.

Namibian road labourers protest

Road labourers have camped outside the offices of Roads Authority and the Ministry of Works in Winhoek demanding unpaid wages. Alweendo Awala told reporters that he was owed \$N73,000.

Managers at the state-owned company claim that subcontractors employed the workers and they have no responsibility for the wages. But a presidential inquiry into the Roads Authority has found that a former manager handed out contracts to his girlfriend, her brother-in-law, her mother and a colleague’s wife. Since the workers used official vehicles they believed they were working for the Road Authority.



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