

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

12 March 2004

Miners union in England suspends strike

On March 10, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in the UK called off a planned strike due to be held at the Kellingley mine in West Yorkshire. The NUM announced that it was suspending strike action pending the outcome of a High Court injunction against UK Coal. UK Coal has responded to the legal action by stating that they will contest any legal action.

The two 24-hour strikes that were to be held on March 11 and March 15, were originally called the by union to protest new working practices at Kellingley when miners are transferred there from the soon to close nearby Selby coalmine complex. The decision to call off the latest action follows a 24-hour walkout strike held by miners at the pit on March 8. The NUM announced that the strike was supported by all its 350 members at Kellingley.

The union condemned the new working practices as ““ anti-social” and would result in miners working 12-hour shifts in “hostile conditions” underground. This month marks the 20th anniversary of the yearlong 1984-85 miners strike.

Trade unions in Italy call 4-hour general strike and protest

Trade unions in Italy have called for support for a 4-hour general strike to be held in the Lazio region later this week, as well as a regional demonstration in Rome. The strike call follows the refusal of the Lazio regional authorities to negotiate with trade unions over proposals on investment to create jobs.

Unions have announced their opposition to the recently approved fourth regional budget for 2004 that they claim does not develop any labour-sector investments. On March 10 Lazio trade unionists participated in a meeting in Palalottomatica, Rome to call for support for the strike and protest and for the authorities in Lazio to continue negotiations.

Italian workers to hold half-day general strike in pension reform protest

Italian workers are set to strike for a half-day on March 26 in opposition to the government’s pension reform proposals. This week the three main trade unions representing 11 million workers called the strike. It is the latest in a series of protests against the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

The unions are campaigning against the proposal by the government to raise the minimum age of retirement to 60 as part of restructuring plans to save 0.7 percent of GDP annually. At present workers are able to retire at 57 provided they have paid into the pension system for 35 years.

The first general strike to oppose the pension forms was held last October and was widely supported. Further protests continued and in December an estimated 250,000 workers demonstrated in Rome. The Italian Parliament is to debate the reform bill on April 19.

Bus drivers strike continues in Lincolnshire, England

Hundreds of bus drivers in Lincolnshire continued their ongoing strike this week with a further one-day stoppage on March 8. The staff are members of the Transport and General Workers Union and are employed by Lincolnshire Roadcar. The dispute involves a protest over pay and

union recognition.

The company currently only recognizes the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) trade union. The dispute began following a vote on pay which the TGWU members rejected. Lincolnshire Roadcar then implemented the pay deal only taking into account the acceptance of the RMT.

Altadis workers in Lille continue blockade

Since March 8, workers at the Altadis cigarette plant in France have blockaded the entrance of the factory employing 456 staff that is set for closure. All exits and entrances are blocked. This week the workers representative Jaques Crombet demanded the management of the Spanish-French Altadis group recognise a report that concludes that the plant would be rentable and the shutdown is not justified. On March 9, a demonstration to the Lille major’s office was held.

In June 2003 the shedding of 1,678 jobs in the group was announced, including 700 of the 5,280 jobs in France. As well as Lille the plants at Morlaix (Finistère) and of Tonnains (Lot-et-Garonne) will also be closed with 977 of 7,680 Spanish jobs lost.

Public transport workers strike in Lille, France

On March 8 tramway workers and bus drivers held a stoppage in the city of Lille. Only the automatic Metro ran normally. The action was a one-day warning strike demanding an increase in wages and denouncing the worsening working conditions.

Israeli religious councils launch three-day strike

Religious council employees began a three-day strike on March 9. The decision to launch the strike was made following consultations with the Committee of Rabbis and the Histadrut labour federation to protest overdue salaries. Many workers have not been paid for several months. Employees have held similar strikes over the past half-year.

All services offered by the rabbinical offices, religious councils, and the Hevre Kadisha burial society were halted entirely or minimised, and most offices will close during the duration of the action. Only mikvehs (ritual purification baths) will operate as usual.

The strike also means the cutting back on burial hours, non-issuing of marriage licenses, suspending kosher slaughter, and conducting huppas only outside wedding halls. Operating hours and services at cemeteries will be reduced, and they will be locked after opening hours.

JNF employees strike to protest firings in Israel

The Jewish National Fund (JNF) employees’ committee has declared a strike following management’s decision to fire 300 workers and cut salaries by 16 percent.

The employees are demanding an investigation by an independent accountant to detail the increase in the organisation’s management expenses and excessive salaries paid to political appointees, reflected by the JNF’s financial reports. Employees’ committee chairman Gil Fener claims that the management refused to present its financial reports to the workers. The reports show that the JNF’s 2001-2002 expenditures have grown to NIS 102 million.

Fener said that considering JNF’s present state, any efficiency plan would come only after the implementation of previous labour agreements,

the creation of an agreed recovery programme, and agreement on a rescue plan. "It's unthinkable that the management should continue its wasteful policies. The current negotiations go on without the slightest disclosure," he said.

Workers are demanding salary reduction for senior JNF officials, as well as lower foreign travel and dining expenses.

Workers at Israel Discount Bank strike over privatisation

This week Discount Bank workers committee chairman Riki Bachar confirmed the plan to declare a labour dispute, due to MI Holdings' (State of Israel Properties) declaration that a privatisation tender would be published by the end of March, whether or not an agreement is reached with the bank's employees. MI Holdings holds the state's stake in the bank.

Discount Bank employees' demands include retaining the bank's current labour contracts after its privatisation, a commitment by the buyer not to distribute a dividend or to sell Israel Discount Bank of New York, and to pay a goodwill grant to bank employees.

The workers' committee at Discount Bank is planning to take action to try to prevent privatisation of the bank. Riki Bachar, head of the workers' committee, said on March 8 that they were planning "extremely harsh steps". He said the committee would meet with its legal adviser to discuss legal steps against privatisation. It would at the same time ask the Histadrut labour federation to declare work sanctions so that the bank's 6,000 employees could begin sanctions or a strike after the required 15-day "cooling-off" period.

The Discount Bank workers committee is currently negotiating with the bank management on a wage increment for 2002-03. The workers committee is demanding a six percent wage rise for each year, (a total wage rise of 12 percent) but the bank management is offering far less.

UAE construction workers protest unpaid salaries

Around 3,700 labourers at two construction companies in the United Arab Emirates stopped work this week to protest the non-payment of salaries. Around 1,200 workers at one company walked 15 kilometres from their accommodation in Sonapur to the labour ministry office in Abu Hail to lodge a complaint, alleging bad treatment and lack of payment of wages for the last five months. They were representing a workforce of 2,000.

The construction workers are protesting against conditions which entail them being picked up from their cramped accommodation block at 3.30 a.m. and dropped off at the worksite an hour later. They are left in the open until 7 a.m. when their day of labour begins, ending 11 hours later at 6 p.m., the workers said. Anyone who misses the bus for the return journey must make the long walk home. The workers also say that 18-20 of them are sharing an 18-square metre room and that 200 new employees are living in makeshift homes on the building site itself.

Company and labour officials reached a settlement to the pay dispute under which a month's salary will be paid this week. A further two months' salary will be made good in mid-March and two more months will be handed over at the beginning of April.

The staff, who include migrant labourers from the Indian sub-continent, have not received any pay since October 2003. A worker speaking anonymously said, "We are working in a high hazard occupation, where we are at risk of serious injury and death. But the company does not bother to ensure our safety. Whenever one of us falls sick, the company does not care."

South African airport workers strike enters third month

The strike of baggage handlers, employed by Equity Aviation Services, has entered its third month. The action, which began on December 18, is in protest against the employers' decision to impose an increase in the working week from 40 hours to 45 hours. The strikers, who are members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU), are demanding an eight percent salary increase. They have been locked

out since February 13, when their employers issued an ultimatum demanding an immediate return to work, acceptance of the revised hours and a four percent pay increase.

Majority shareholders in Equity Aviation Services are the British multinational service company Serco and a South African black empowerment consortium, who jointly bought 51 percent of the state-owned company Apron Services from Transnet.

Willie Madisha, president of Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) told the *Mail and Guardian* that his organisation would call on its members in the petroleum industry to impose a go-slow in support of the baggage handlers. He said COSATU was organising a fund to buy food for the strikers. COSATU called a demonstration in support of the strike to be held at Bloemfontein airport on March 8.

Representatives of SATAWU and Equity Aviation Services met last weekend under the auspices of the Commission For Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration to discuss a new offer over pay and conditions.

Two leaders of Burundain teachers' unions arrested

Eulalie Nibiz, leader of the Union of Burundi Educational Workers, and Adolphe Wakana, leader of the Free Union of Burundi Education, were arrested by the state police on March 9 and taken to a jail of the government's intelligence services.

The two leaders of the main teachers' unions were taken into custody after they had attended a meeting with striking teachers in the country's capital, Bujumbura, to review the situation in the national strike of teachers' that began on January 5.

On March 10, IRIN reported that the security forces acted on the orders of President Domitien Ndayizeye during a meeting with parents, student representatives and senior officials of the Ministry of Education. He said, "We cannot tolerate this. I order security forces to arrest and put in jail teachers or students who behave as troublemakers. I am ready to go before the court to justify these arrests."

The strike, which according to IRIN has affected at least one million children nationwide, began when 5,000 secondary school teachers took action to pressure the government to implement a promised salary agreement. In early February another 15,000 primary school teachers joined the strike.

Teachers say they are prepared to return to work and discuss outstanding issues if the government is willing to pay their salaries for the period of the strike. The government has refused.

In 2002, Burundain teachers went on a month-long strike over delays in the payment of their salaries.

National strike of health workers in Sierra Leone

The entire health sector in Sierra Leone is paralysed by a strike of health workers, who are demanding the payment of a 35-month housing and transport allowance owed by government.

On March 8 the *Concord Times* reported that the main gates leading to the Connaught Hospital in Freetown, were closed and barricaded. One of the strikers told the paper that the outstanding money is twenty five thousand Leones for each month (about \$US10).

When asked if they had heard any word from Health Minister, Agnes Taylor-Lewis, one of the strikers replied, "Yes, she visited us only to mock us that though the government has no money now, they were going to come with a helicopter to pay us."

The strikers insisted that they were not going to return to work unless and until she returns with a helicopter full of money to pay their dues. They were angered by the minister's statement that the hospital was not bringing any revenue to the government.



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