

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

19 March 2004

Italian trade unions announce half-day general strike in pension protest

The three main trade unions in Italy have called for a half-day general strike to be held on March 26 in the latest protest against Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's government's pension reform proposals. Mass demonstrations have been held through the country in October and December of last year and have continued in 2004.

The government's plans include raising the minimum age of retirement from 57 to 60. Originally it had proposed that men be permitted to collect a full pension only at the age of 65 and women at 60 or after they have made 40 years of contributions.

On March 16, the new pension's bill was presented to parliament and the following day the trade unions representing 11 million workers—around half of them retirees—voted to continue limited strike action. Under current legislation workers are able to retire at 57 if they have paid into the pension system for 35 years.

Irish trade union calls off planned airline strike

On March 16, the planned strike by baggage handlers, clerical workers and emergency crews employed by Aer Rianta, Ireland's state-owned airport operator, was suspended by trade unions following an agreement by the prime minister, Bertie Ahern, to consult with them on the company's possible break-up. The postponement of the strike was announced at a High Court hearing in Dublin, where budget airline Ryanair had been seeking an injunction against the walkout. Ryanair announced that it had not received a guarantee the dispute had been resolved and the hearing was adjourned until March 25.

The industrial action was due to be held on March 18 for six hours at the country's three busiest airports, Dublin, Cork and Shannon. SIPTU, the largest trader union in Ireland, represents 70 percent of Aer Rianta workers. It issued an emailed statement revealing a letter from Ahern. In his letter Ahern said that he would allow the union access to the government's business plan for running the airfields separately. SIPTU announced that the letter met "our concerns that key financial and other relevant information regarding the proposed break-up of Aer Rianta will be made available to the union."

The action was originally planned to coincide with the St. Patrick's Day holiday. More than 120,000 people are expected to visit Ireland for the celebrations and the action would have caused substantial disruption to more than 50,000 airline passengers.

In a separate dispute employees at the state-owned bus and rail company CIE are to continue with a 24-hour strike on March 18. The stoppage is being held to protest at the lack of negotiations with the company regarding its future and the privatisation of some routes.

SNCF railworkers in France protest to protect pension rights

Some 10,000 former SNCF railway workers from all French regions demonstrated on March 16 for an increase of their wages and protested against the pensions policy of the French government and its transport ministry. They denounced the loss of buying power and expressed fear that the special railway pensions system would be attacked in the future.

Currently one third of the pensions are less than 1,100 euros a month. The unions are calling for an increase in pensions of an additional 200 euros monthly to be implemented immediately.

Last year pensions were reduced in general as a result of the so-called *loi Fillon* (Fillon law)—with the exception of those of SNCF and RATP workers. Those workers now fear that their pensions will be threatened in the near future.

The same day the CGT trade union called all RATP-workers to strike and to hold an assembly in front of the Paris headquarters of RATP in pursuit of the demand for an increase in their wages.

Strike and day of action by teachers, education and research workers in France

National education and research staff held a day of action in France on March 12 in protest at budgetary cuts. The action was the first demonstration by educational and research workers since the Spring of last year. During the day 15,000 demonstrated in Paris. Many high-school pupils and students, as well as educational high school teachers and scientists, joined the demonstration behind the slogan "Save the research and the university!" Privatisation and growing inequality in education was also denounced.

At Toulouse and Marseille 10,000 took part in protests and 5,000 demonstrated at Lyon and Bordeaux. The unions announced that strike participation was at 40 to 50 percent.

Those trade unions involved in education, the students union UNEF, and the federation of pupils' parents FCPE are campaigning against planned cuts in staff levels of 4,500 and a reduction of new teachers employed from 18,000 to 12,000 (both for the coming school year from September 2004). The workers also fear the restriction of budgets and the transfer of non-teaching staff from centralised to regional administration.

Alstom workers at Saine-Saint-Denis, France strike at job loss threats

Workers employed by the engineering firm Alstom at Saine-Saint-Denis in France have been on strike for the past week in opposition to job cuts. Some 350 jobs are to be shed, with 250 workers under threat this month. The job losses are part of 8,000 announced worldwide in March 2003, with 1,862 of them to go in France. On March 15 strikers blocked off all entrances to the turbines producing factory.

The strike action was called by the CFDT and FO trade unions. Management at Alstom have refused to negotiate with CGT union regarding its propositions on how to maintain jobs at the La Courneuve plant.

On March 16, 10 workers at La Courneuve tried to enter the headquarters of the company at Levallois (Hauts-de-Seine) in an attempt to hold negotiations with management. Security guards blocked the entrances, preventing 1,000 employees from entering.

Secondary school teachers in Israel continue strike

Members of the Israeli Secondary School Teachers' Association continued their partial four-week strike last week. The industrial action is being conducted in a dispute with the treasury over pension terms. The

strike went ahead although teachers did not suspend classes at high schools.

The teachers have suspended all extra-curricular activities such as school trips, advanced training courses and meetings with parents, and are also holding back the preliminary marks on matriculation (bagrut) exams. The teachers intensified their sanctions last week, when they delayed classes on Wednesday and Thursday till 10.00 a.m. in several towns and cities.

On March 17, teachers unions stepped up their actions and closed schools in numerous cities and towns at 11.00 a.m. The staff has warned that if the impasse between the association and the treasury is not resolved, they will step up action to include additional schools. They are also threatening to disrupt preparations of the bagrut exams.

Treasury sources accuse the teachers of requesting pension benefits higher than those received by other public sector employees. Negotiations between the Secondary Schools Teachers Association and the Finance Ministry will be renewed toward the end of this week.

The dispute is set to continue with teachers refraining from participating in activities outside the schools' ground. This will also affect the release of the results of students' pre-matriculation "Magen" exams—necessary for students who intend to take the nationally administrated matriculation exams.

Israeli port workers set to strike

Industrial action looks likely at national ports in Israel following a breakdown of negotiations between Histadrut (General Federation of Labour in Israel), the Israel Ports Authority and the Ministry of Finance over "structural reforms" at the ports.

Following the failure of talks, the National Labour Court is obliged to hold a hearing on Histadrut's petition to cancel the injunction against a strike at the ports. The court issued the injunction in October 2003 at the request of the State, the Federation of Israeli Chambers of Commerce and the Manufacturers Association.

On March 11, Judge Adler (of the Labour Court) oversaw intensive negotiations between the parties, which lasted all night. The Ministry of Finance said the effort was "a last-minute attempt to settle the dispute at the ports."

Negotiations under the aegis of the National Labour Court were opened after the negotiations between the Ministry of Finance and the Histadrut and ports workers committees became deadlocked, principally over the management of the ports' assets. Under the ministry's proposals for restructuring the Ports Authority, each port's assets would be transferred to a separate government-owned holding company, rather than being owned by each port company. The Histadrut and ports' workers committees are demanding that the ports retain ownership of the assets.

The Manufacturers Association will petition the National Labour Court against the ports workers' committees for contempt of court. The Manufacturers Association alleges that the workers violated the injunction against strikes by launching labour sanctions on March 12.

Mombasa council workers threaten renewed strike

Up to 4,000 Mombasa Municipal Council workers were due to renew their strike action on March 17 over the non-payment of their Sh70 million salary arrears. An earlier strike was called off last December after the council agreed to pay the workers' arrears between January and February this year.

The Kenya Local Government Workers Union (KLGWU) chairman, Mohamed Gari, and the secretary, Hamisi Katana, told the *East African Standard* (Nairobi) that the council had failed to honour the return-to-work-formula.

Gari said that Mombasa Mayor Taib Ali Taib was partly to blame for the council's failure to pay. He claimed that instead of ensuring that the arrears were paid, the mayor had resorted to threats.

The workers are demanding the removal of the mayor. "We no longer

require the mayor at the parlour. We shall carry a coffin to the Town Hall to show our dislike for Taib," Gari said.

Burundian teachers suspend strike

The national strike of Burundian teachers, which began on January 5, has been suspended. Primary and secondary schools throughout the country reopened on March 15.

On the day of the return to work, Philbert Ngenzahayo, a representative of the National Council of Secondary Education Staff, told *IRIN*, "We accepted to return to work for the love of Burundi's children. We wanted to prove our goodwill unlike the government which, instead of resolving teachers' problem, complicates it."

He said that the strike would be resumed if the government refused to accede to their demands for better wages and housing allowances. "We want to take the whole nation, parents and children as witnesses, to understand that if the strike is resumed it will have been due to the unwillingness of the government." He added that the government must also pay salaries for the period of the strike.

South African baggage handler's strike deadlocked

Tensions have increased between South African airport baggage handlers, who have been on strike since December 18, and their employers, Equity Aviation Services (EAS). The strikers are demanding a wage increase of eight percent with no worsening of conditions, against EAS's offer of four percent and an increase in the working week from 40 to 45 hours.

Last Sunday EAS placed a full-page advertisement in the *South African Sunday Times*. The advert accuses the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (SATAWU) of refusing to negotiate in good faith. "As a result of the media/political mileage being extracted from the strike, we have witnessed a refusal to negotiate and an alarming hardening of stance."

It claims that only twenty nine percent of EAS's workforce is on strike.

SATAWU's response has been to accuse EAS of spreading "lies and half lies". The union represents up to a thousand workers, of whom 120 have been dismissed during the action. It insists that on March 16 it made concessions that almost led to an agreement. SATAWU was prepared to accept a six percent pay rise and a working week of 42.5 hours. Management was intransigent, still insisting on an increase to 45 hours and as a result the union has gone back to its original demand.

EAS blames the situation on changing conditions in the airline industry, claiming that it lost money in the last financial year. SATAWU has demanded that the company opens its books. It is also demanding the dismissal of the company directors. In a statement on March 15, the union threatened international action. "Should no settlement be reached within the next few days, we will ask the International Transport Workers' Federation to step up its calls for international pressure."



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