

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

26 March 2004

## Teachers in Telford, England strike against job losses

On March 24 teachers at Madeley Court School in Telford, England held a one-day strike over threatened job losses.

Eighteen teachers, members of the NASUWT teaching union, may lose their jobs as part of a review led by a neighbouring school, Thomas Telford City Technology College—one of England's top comprehensives. Representatives of Thomas Telford City Technology College have been tasked with “turning around” Madeley Court School on the basis that it has had superior exam results. Fewer than three-in-10 pupils at Madeley Court have scored at least five A to C grades at GCSE since 1997.

Teachers are opposed to the measures used to appoint Madeley Court's head Vic Maher, the former deputy head at Thomas Telford. The NASUWT said they were “at best dubious and at worst out with national regulations” and have called for an inquiry into the matter. Under government policy “failing schools” can be closed, merged or forced to “federate” with more successful local schools that have achieved better exam results.

## Journalists in Poland protest in alleged slander dispute

Polish journalists at several newspapers began a three-day protest on March 22 against a court's decision to sentence Andrzej Marek—a local newspaper editor in the town of Police—for having allegedly slandered a local government official. Marek is due to begin his three-month prison sentence this week pending a court considering his appeal to suspend the sentence.

The journalists placed a cage borrowed from Warsaw Zoo in front of government offices, taking turns to sit in it for 30-minute shifts. Those involved in the protest included Mariusz Ziomecki, the editor-in-chief of the *Super Express* newspaper and Grzegorz Jankowski, a journalist from the *Fakt* newspaper. Human rights protesters accompanied them.

## UK rail maintenance workers to ballot for industrial action

Rail maintenance workers in the UK employed by engineering firm Jarvis are to vote in the next few weeks on whether to hold industrial action in a dispute over job security. The ballot of 3,000 staff is being organised by the Rail Maritime and Transport union. Maintenance contracts are to be transferred from Jarvis to Network Rail on April 1 and workers fear that job losses and cuts in pay will occur.

## Firefighters in France hold national day of action

On March 25, 33,000 firefighters are to hold a national day of action including a national demonstration in Paris. The firefighter's dispute began on February 25 over the issue of guaranteed pension rights and a new contract.

Trade unions are demanding a guarantee of the right to retire at 50 without conditions. At the moment the pension age is 55. Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy has proposed within his legislation—the

“law of the modernisation of civil security”—to allow retirement at 50 “under certain conditions.”

The firemen fear that the pension reform proposed by Social Affairs, Labour and Solidarity Minister François Fillon may result in workers having to work 48 years to secure the full pension rate. As compensation they have demanded new account regulations. At the moment five years are taken in account for 30 years of service. The unions are demanding five years for 10 years of service.

The national movement includes only professional firemen. Some 235,000 firemen are in the voluntary fire brigade, with 9,500 working under military statutory conditions without the right to strike.

Since February 27, 1,100 firemen in the north region of the country have taken periodic strike action. In addition to the pension issue, the workers are protesting that they have to work 2,400 hours a year, but only 1,600 hours are paid. They are calling for pay increases or free time in compensation and new contracts.

During the past 10 years there have been 200 deaths of firefighters nationally. In the Loire region, an explosion in October hurt 20 firemen and the firefighters blocked the traffic in the city of St. Etienne the same day.

## Noroxo factory workers strike at plant in Harnes, France

Workers at Noroxo, a French petrochemical factory owned by the American Exxon Mobil group, have been striking since March 20. The alcohol and industrial acid producing factory was closed on January 4, because it had been identified as the source of the Legionnaires' disease that had caused 13 deaths in Pas-de-Calais.

The authorities of the region then allowed the plant to continue on March 19, without informing the 170 workers of its future intentions regarding the facility. On March 20 the strike began and pickets were established outside the factory. A delegation of workers met with representatives of the group to obtain further information. On March 22, the managing director of the plant said that its economic situation was to be analysed. That day workers held three members of management in their offices until the evening.

## French teachers and students protest job cuts

On March 18, 10,000 sport students demonstrated in Paris against projected job losses of sports teachers in 2004. Students and their teachers from several French universities demonstrated together to denounce the planned 41 percent reduction in sport teachers' jobs that is to be implemented in the coming school year. The government plans to reduce the number of new teachers' jobs created throughout France from 18,000 in 2003 to 12,500 in 2004.

The minister of sports also plans to change the way that diplomas and professional titles are to be recognised for employment. A new scheme is planned entitled LMD (Licence, Master, Doctorate).

During the protests students of the different universities of Poitiers

continued to block the entrances to the university.

### **Egyptian engineers threaten to strike**

Engineers across Egypt have organised a march to the People's Assembly on March 27. The workers have also threatened to go on strike if their demands for reform are not met.

The Engineers' Union has been under government supervision and prevented from holding elections since 1995. Following the election victory for candidates from opposition parties, especially the Islamists, in the union's council elections, the government imposed custody. Nearly 140,000 engineers of the 320,000 union members were denied their right to vote.

Thousands of union members called this week for the resignation of the custodians imposed by the government to pave the way for new elections. The union has also threatened to blacklist the five custodians, notably Dr Ahmed Moharram, a former minister of housing.

The protest by the group, calling themselves Engineers Against Custody, sought to hold a conference at the Engineers' Union, but the judicial custodian refused. Thousands of troops surrounded the union headquarters, forcing the engineers to use the Lawyer's Union premises instead.

Egyptian trade unions have witnessed increased activity since the early 1980s, after the government restricted the formation of political parties by imposing an Emergency Law. The government then resorted to imposing judicial custody on the doctors, engineers, lawyers and pharmacists' unions when elections brought control over them to members from the opposition.

According to statistics by Engineers Against Custody, Egyptian engineers have lost their prominent status internationally and regionally because of the custody imposed on their union. Among international posts they lost were the presidency of the Arab Engineers' Union and the Engineers' Organisation Union in Islamic countries and the post of vice-president for the Engineering Consultant Offices.

### **Bank of Israel workers push for strike action**

Bank of Israel management last week reversed its promise to the workers committee that it would not withhold workers committee fees from salaries. On May 23 the bank workers committee asked the Histradut (General Federation of Labour in Israel) to approve its declaration of an industrial dispute.

To justify its request the workers committee cited the employment of large numbers of external consultants and workers from external companies, and the lack of promotion for Bank of Israel employees.

### **Nigerian lecturers' strike**

First semester examinations were cancelled at the University of Nigeria (UNN) on March 22 when members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) went on strike in protest against the non-payment of outstanding salaries. The action affected both the Nsukka and Enugu campuses of the university.

The examinations, which began last week, were stopped when union officials visited the different departments to inform them of the decision to strike. Students, who had gathered in the exam halls, were sent home.

A notice from the ASUU was posted around the university. It pointed out that as outstanding entitlements were not paid before February 27 2004, "the members shall not set questions for the 1st semester examination 2002/2003 and they shall not conduct any examination... nor submit grade for any 1st semester courses." The university authorities had promised to look into their demands, but

nothing had been done.

*The Vanguard* (Lagos) reported that the action of the lecturers was directed to forcing a settlement from outgoing Vice Chancellor Professor Ginigeme Mbanefoh, who is due to retire in May. Students at the university have called on the authorities to settle the dispute "without delay" so that their examinations can continue.

### **Striking Kenyan council workers defy intimidation**

Up to 4,000 Mombasa Municipal Council workers are continuing their strike to force payment of their wage arrears, in spite of their employers' threat to sack them.

The sack threat follows an attack on March 17 by heavily armed riot police on a gathering of the strikers outside the town hall, and the arrest of Kenya Local Government Workers Union (KLGWU) chairman Mohamed Gari and his secretary, Harrison Katana. The two were incarcerated in the Central Police Station and subjected to interrogation. The Mombassa police have denied that the two officials are under arrest.

Gari had just begun addressing the gathering of around 1,000 strikers outside the town hall, when the police ordered the workers to disperse. When they refused policemen armed with rifles, batons and clubs began to attack. *The East Africa Standard* (Nairobi) reported, "All hell broke loose. The defiant officials and some workers engaged the police in running battles." Police threw tear gas canisters into the crowd, injuring some of the workers. Others lost their belongings as they fled.

The council issued the sacking notice, claiming that the strike is illegal, since the union did not issue a new strike notice when the terms of the agreement to end the last strike (made in mid-December 2003) expired on March 16. Town clerk Rashid Mwakiwiwi said, "I am advising all the striking workers to resume duty immediately since the strike has no legal basis. It is gross misconduct, which could lead to summary dismissal."

The strikers have treated the council notice with derision, and say they will not return to work until the arrears of Sh70 million (US\$900,000) is paid in full. They complained that their families were suffering, with their children forced to stay at home due to lack of school fees. Some said they had been evicted from their houses due to non-payment of rent.



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