

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

2 April 2004

Italian workers hold four-hour general strike

On March 26 workers throughout Italy held protests, demonstrations and strikes in more than 50 cities as part of a half-day general strike to oppose the government's pension reform plans. The stoppage was the fourth general strike held in Italy since April 2002, when unions held the first general strike for two decades.

The action was called by the three main trade unions in the country including the largest, the CGIL. The strike hit public transport, schools, banks, factories and some larger retailer outlets over more than four hours, as millions of workers, pensioners, students and unemployed people joined the protest. Schools, banks and post offices closed for the entire day.

Demonstrations with thousands of participants were held in the cities of Rome, Turin and Milan and many others. ANSA, the Italian news agency reported that Fiat, Italy's largest auto manufacturer announced that 18 percent of its work force stayed away at its various plants. Trade unions said that strike levels for Fiat workers were at least 60 percent.

Employees from the crisis-ridden debt laden dairy group Parmalat led the protest in the northern city of Parma. In Milan, the industrial action resulted in the famous opera house La Scala having to cancel a performance of Bellini's *Beatrice di Tenda*. Airline workers did not participate in the general strike, as they plan to hold a stoppage on April 5.

The government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's plans to raise the male retirement age on the basis that the economy is not able to sustain more state pensions in the future. Under the legislation employees would have to pay into the pension system for 40 years in order to receive a full state pension. The legislation has been approved by the cabinet but not yet by parliament.

The government attempts to justify its actions on the basis that the state pension accounts for more than 15 percent of GDP, at a time of low birth rates and an ageing population.

The leader of the CGIL Guglielmo Epifani spoke at a rally in the Sicilian capital, Palermo, and said the general strike was "a response to the government to say they've got it wrong, about everything. For the past 36 months the country has been at a standstill, the longest industrial stagnation of

the post-war era. We have 1,500 firms in crisis, involving 200,000 workers. Work has become precarious and young people are seeing the prospect of secure, quality jobs slipping away."

In response to comments from the government regarding the fate of several Italian soccer clubs which are heavily in debt, Luigi Angeletti, leader of the UIL union, said, "We want to ask the government to change its economic policy. We need more development and more employment. The government should talk less about football and more about normal citizens."

The government has refused to withdraw its proposals with European Affairs Minister Rocco Buttiglione saying that there was "no room to manoeuvre. The government has significantly modified its original proposal to take into account as much as possible the unions' concerns."

Greek workers strike in run-up to Olympic Games

On March 31, workers in Greece involved in the building of the infrastructure for this summer's Olympic Games held a national strike to demand higher wages and a shorter workweek.

Employees on the project are calling for an increase in wages of eight percent and a cut in the working week of one hour to 39 hours.

The strike resulted in the disrupting of transportation, manufacturing and the construction of venues for the games. During the action trains, ferries and public transportation services closed for 24 hours, heavily impacting on the capital city and focal point of the strike, Athens. The pay demand of the workers is more than double that being offered by employers in current negotiations for a national contract for 2.5 million workers.

The strike is being held just three weeks after the election of the new government of Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis. Last month it was announced that fewer than half the venues were ready, leading Karamanlis to put himself in charge of the final preparations.

Last year the Greek economy grew by about 4.2 percent, fuelled in part by the more than \$8 billion being spent on the games. Inflation is set to reach 3.5 percent this year as a result of the costs associated with staging the games.

Christos Polyzogopoulos, president of the Confederation

of Greek Workers, said of the dispute, “Things are simple. We have growth of about five percent and this means we won’t step back on our demand for eight percent in wage increases.”

Postal workers in Oxford, England hold unofficial strike

Royal Mail staff in Oxford, England held unofficial strike action on March 31. The strike began on the evening at Oxford’s main sorting office and the strike is thought to be centred on shift patterns. The action was expected to delay mail deliveries in the city on April 1.

Following the walkout a joint statement by the mail centre manager at Royal Mail Oxford and Bob Cullen, of the Communication Workers Union said that they were “concerned by the unrest within the office at the current time.”

An independent external company is set to begin an investigation into the shift patterns at the sorting office at the end of the week.

Firefighters attacked by riot police in Paris

Firefighters protesting in Paris, France on March 26 against cuts in their pensions and cost cutting were fired on with tear gas and water cannon by riot police.

Following a march in the city several hundred firefighters were demonstrating in the public square in front of Paris’s 19th century opera house, the Palais Garnier, when riot police attacked them. The police said later that they had been attacked by missiles such as bottles thrown by the firefighters. The confrontation lasted for more than two hours.

One firefighter on the demonstration summed up the mood of the workers: “It’s a dangerous job and we’re tired of the government not appreciating us. It’s no surprise it turned violent.”

Firefighters’ unions reported that government legislation that required people to work longer for a pension had slashed ordinary fireman’s retirement payout to 940 euros (\$1,140) a month from 1,400 euros. The firefighters’ protest is the latest in a series by workers throughout France in opposition to government pension reforms, unemployment and wage cuts.

Ghanaian library workers strike over pay

Workers at the Ghana Library Board (GLB) have walked out on strike to demand an end to the delay in solving problems with their salary scales.

The strike began on March 26, when library staff decided that the government was taking too long to address their grievances on pay and conditions. The staff has been campaigning for three years for the correction of mistakes made by the accounting firm, Price Waterhouse, and the removal of the resulting anomalies in their pay structure.

Price Waterhouse was brought in by the government in 1996 to draw up a salary structure for its employees. However, the company based its findings on an incorrect management structure for the GLB, and this left the library staff worse off than their counterparts in the civil service.

The strikers explained that “our young men and women can’t marry and those who can, can’t look after their family yet we are working.” One of the strikers added, “Our children are also out of school because we cannot pay school fees.”

Forestry workers block work in Cameroon

Employees of the Cameroon National Forestry Development Agency, ONADEF, which is now being replaced by a new body known as ANAFOR, are blocking entry to the premises as part of their campaign to demand payment of seven months’ salary. They blame the ministry of the environment and forestry for refusing to settle their pay arrears.

Work at ANAFOR (a French acronym for National Agency for the Support of Forestry Development) has been completely stopped by the protest.

The workers belong to the SYNEA trade union. Their spokesman, Ndi Tobie, said that the minister of the environment and forestry had failed to keep promises made to the workers in December 2003. At that time, the minister had promised that one month’s salary arrears would be paid in January 2004, and the payments of arrears would continue alongside payment of employees’ salary on a regular basis. Tobie said that this promise had not been kept.

The authorities in Cameroon have declared the strike illegal, and are using the country’s commitments under the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative to justify their refusal to accede to the workers’ demands.

Education workers strike in Nigeria

Academic and non-academic staff of Kwara State Polytechnic, Ilorin, Nigeria began strike action last week demanding payment of unpaid salaries from February and March 2003. Nigeria’s commissioner for education, Dr Femi Ogunshola, threatened to implement the Federal Government rule of “no work, no pay” as the strike began. The Committee of Unions of Tertiary Institutions (CUTI) instructed its members to stop work until they were paid the outstanding salaries.



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