

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

16 April 2004

## Power workers in France strike to oppose privatisation

Power workers employed by the state-owned Gaz de France (GDF) and Electricite de France (EDF) held a strike and demonstrations nationally on April 13 to protest plans by the government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin to open the sectors up to private finance. On April 11, electricity workers had cut off power for several hours to the city of Lille as a "warning shot."

The April 13 action resulted in power failures throughout France, with at least 800 outages reported nationwide. These included an outage at the palace of Versailles outside Paris where 3,500 tourists had to be evacuated during the morning. In the city of Rouen, 70,000 people went without electricity for an hour.

Some 145,000 workers are employed in the industries and many of these participated in the strike and demonstrations. The EDF announced that half of its staff was involved in the strike. At least 8,000 employees took part in a march to the state council offices at the Palais Royal, near the Louvre museum in Paris and demonstrations were also held in Strasbourg, Lyon, Grenoble and Metz.

The CGT trade union said that millions of homes had their electricity switched over to the lower night-time tariff for the duration of the strike, which would result in a cut in the company's income for the day.

The state council, France's highest administrative court, is currently examining legislation to change the status of the GDF and EDF. The council is to discuss the government's utilities bill on April 22.

## Civil servants in UK hold two day strike in pay dispute

Civil servants in Britain held a 48-hour strike in the UK on April 13 and 14 in several disputes over pay. Up to 100,000 workers participated in the action including staff at Jobcentres, benefit offices and prisons. Many benefit offices used by the unemployed and people accessing state benefit payments were shut.

The stoppage was called by the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) and involved staff employed by the Department for Work and Pension. The strike is centred on a pay deal contract that was imposed in July 2003. The union considers the contract to be unlawful and has threatened to take the department to the High Court unless it is withdrawn, stating that the "unilateral imposition" was a breach of contract. The contract included a new pay performance scheme which the PCS has condemned on the basis that staff are now on "poverty pay."

In a separate dispute, administration and support workers at the Prison Service held a strike over pay involving 4,500 employees.

## Post Office workers strike continues in Oxford, England

Postal workers at the main sorting office and two delivery offices in Cowley, Oxford continued their strike this week. The strike began on March 30 in a dispute over alleged bullying. Since the industrial action involving 400 workers began, more than four million items of post remain undelivered. The action continued this week following the breakdown in talks between the Communication Workers Union and Royal Mail management.

The Royal Mail has drafted in managers from other offices in a failed

attempt to clear the backlog.

## Sacked workers at Russian mechanics plant begin hunger strike over unpaid wages

On April 13, more than 100 workers formerly employed at a mechanics plant in the town of Nevyansk in the Sverdlovsk region of Russia began a hunger strike to demand the payment of unpaid wages. The wages amount to some 10 million roubles (about \$350,000). In September 2003, the plant was declared bankrupt and around 400 workers lost their jobs.

A new machine building plant was then set up using the assets of the company and was tasked with paying off its debts. The trade union involved in the stoppage said that payments made by the new company would not resolve the problem of paying the sacked workers' wages.

## Unemployed Iraqi demonstrators fired on by coalition troops

On March 24, local police and coalition forces fired shots to disperse protesting unemployed people demanding jobs in the city of Najaf, 160 kilometres south of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad.

A crowd of several hundred unemployed workers had gathered in front of the Coalition Civil Administration's office in the centre of Najaf in protest at the lack of jobs. The protesters pelted the Coalition Civil Administration building with stones.

A large detachment of coalition troops and local police immediately rushed to the scene and started shooting in the air. Unlike many other protests last week, no protesters were killed. Unemployment in much of Iraq has reached crisis levels after the US-led war and occupation of the country. In the main Iraqi southern cities, unemployment exceeds 70 percent and there have been no real changes during the last 12 months despite promises by the coalition forces to provide jobs.

There have been large protests in the many southern cities including Kut, Omara, and Basra. Many of these protests have been brutally suppressed by coalition forces and local police.

## Workers demand pay increase at Israel's Discount Bank

Last week, management at Israel's Discount Bank offered the workers committee a three percent pay rise for 2003-2004 for the bank's 5,700 workers, together with a package of meagre inducements. The workers committee rejected the proposal, demanding a 12 percent pay rise. The committee notified management that it would not discuss any concession on selective promotion in 2003, which amounts to an average six percent pay increase.

Committee chairman Riki Bachar Bachar said, "We have a dispute with management, because they are talking with us about 2004, and we're talking about 2003. Management's position is that nothing should be paid for 2003, because there was no inflation that year, but we're unwilling to accept this position."

In the past two years the bank has moved into profit, including a substantial NIS 168 million net profit in 2003.

## Jordanian unions call for a boycott of Sharon government

Vocational trade unions in Jordan have called for a boycott of the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon and a halt to "normalisation" with Israel. The chairman of the Bar association in Jordan, Hussein Majli, who along with

other heads of Jordanian trade unions held a meeting with the Jordanian Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez and several ministers, asked al-Fayez to halt dealings with the Israeli government and to stop the normalisation process. The Jordanian government has opposed the call.

Majli said later that al-Fayez had refused their request and told them that cutting Jordan's relations with Israel and halting normalisation with it would not serve "Jordanian interests," nor Jordanian efforts to secure peace between the Palestinians and Israel.

Jordanian official sources also quoted the Jordanian prime minister as saying that boycotting American goods and cutting relations with the US does not serve "Jordanian interests" either. Following the meeting, the government agreed to provide facilities for trade unions in Jordan for aid to Iraq and "exempting" this aid from extra taxes which were increased by three percent less than two weeks ago.

#### **Nigerian food workers strike against transnationals**

Members of the Nigerian National Union of Food Beverage and Tobacco Employees (NUFBTE) have been on national strike since April 8 against Nestle, Cadbury, Guinness, and Nigeria Breweries Plc. Coca Cola, Seven-Up, Nigeria Flour Mills and other food and beverage companies have also been brought to a halt. The action is in protest against the failure of the Association of Food, Beverage and Tobacco Employers (AFBTE) to reach an agreement with the union over salaries/wages and fringe benefits.

A statement from the union said that negotiations broke down on March 25, as a result of the "carefree attitude, rigidity, violation of principle of exchange and total and utter disregard of the plight of our members by the AFBTE."

Dr Adebayo Kazeem, General Secretary of the NUFBTE said that strike had been solid and effective. He reported attempts by one of the big brewery companies to break the strike and restart production on the weekend after the strike began, but it was forced to give up without any success.

The national strike began after the end of a two-week deadline for the employers to resolve the workers' grievances on their new conditions of service. Union leaders have been calling for talks to be re-opened as soon as possible.

The union has issued instructions that "the strike shall not be suspended or called off unless agreement is signed with the Association of Food, Beverage and Tobacco Employers. Furthermore, under no circumstances whatsoever should anybody return to duty without written directive" from the NUFBTE.

#### **Uganda hit by strikes**

A number of strikes and protests have hit Uganda, including industrial action by lecturers, teachers and workers making fishnets.

Around 1,000 lecturers at Makerere University were on strike for seven days from April 6, having refused a management pay offer of 30 percent. The strikers want a wage of Shs 930,000 and Shs 1.8 million a month for professors. The strike had received backing from the students, and followed a strike by the non-academic staff last month.

In an emergency meeting with the strikers, President Museveni appealed to the lecturers as "a freedom fighter and transformer of society" rather than as their president. He admitted that their wage demand was "peanuts," but condemned the use of the strike weapon. "It was unnecessarily disruptive and caused problems. If you got stuck you should have called me. Why go on strike and cause a paralysis?" He told the meeting he would "sort out" the problems, but could not promise a better salary package until the next financial year.

Despite the president's pleas, the strikers unanimously voted to continue with the strike until they received written guarantees from the government. Prof. Ezra Twesigomwe, the chairman of the Makerere University Academic Staff Association (Muasa) said, "Members have agreed that before they pick their tools to go back to class, they are first

given a written assurance."

Later that day a decision was made to return to work after Prime Minister, Professor Apollo Nsubambi, who is also the university chancellor, provided a written guarantee that the pay claim will be met in the next financial year.

President Museveni also personally intervened to secure the postponement of a national strike by the Medical Worker's Union that had been scheduled to begin on April 13. The medics accuse the Ministry of Public Service of failing to honour the salary increments the president promised them last year. The teachers in Masaka are striking to demand the release of the last two months' pay packets. The teachers tried to gain entry to the mayor and town clerk's offices.

On March 30, primary school teachers in government-aided schools in Masaka municipality took strike action. They picketed the mayor and town clerk's offices, demanding the immediate release of their salary arrears for February and March. Mayor Tibyasa Matovu and town clerk, Lawrence Bageri had to be defended by a police guard.

The strikers told the Ugandan New Vision newspaper, "We have just been getting pay slips from the banks but there is no money on our accounts. What shall we do for Easter?" They vowed not to go back to class until their issue has been solved.

Fifty workers employed by Uganda Fishnet Ltd, are on a sit-down strike to demand payment of their arrears of holiday pay, which are still owed from last year. One of the strikers told the *Monitor* (Kampala), "We do not have money to take home for Easter, no money no life." Another said, "We are being harassed at work, they should give us our money or we are ready to quit the company."

Some strikers said that the factory does not provide them with protective gear and others complained they were being harassed by their bosses. Many of the workers have been employed at the factory for more than two years and still don't have written confirmation of their "permanent" status.

#### **South African aviation strike ends**

The strike of South African airport baggage handlers—the longest in the country's aviation history—has ended. The strike began on December 18 2003, in support of a wage demand of eight percent across the board, with no worsening of conditions. Management's offer of a six percent rise, linked to a 45-hour work week had been unanimously rejected. The strike has cost the workers and Equity Aviation millions of rands in wages and revenues.

Last week both the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu) and Equity Aviation intimated that they were making strenuous efforts to reach an agreement before the election on April 14. The final settlement includes a wage increase of 12 percent, the reinstatement of all dismissed workers (about 150) and a two percent performance incentive. However it also includes an increase in the working week to 45 hours.

Evan Abrahamse, Satawu's aviation national sector coordinator, said the union believed the agreement was in workers' interests. "The fact that they held up for so long shows they were determined to fight for improved working conditions. We are very proud of our members."

Spokesman for Equity Aviation, Herman Fleischmann, said the company wanted to thank the union for "the constructive role they played towards striking a deal ... We are now in a position where we can all move forward in the interest of our business."



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