

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

21 May 2004

Europe

Firefighter's wildcat strike in Manchester, England, escalates into national protest

On May 18, firefighters in Salford, Greater Manchester, held a day of wildcat strike action in a pay dispute. The crews had refused to use new "anti-terror" equipment because they had not received an agreed pay rise. They were sent home without pay as a result. Firefighters at Ashton under Lyne, in Greater Manchester, were also sent home without pay.

The firefighters followed the example of crews in Wales the previous week that had also refused to use the new units.

The walkout by the 36 employees quickly met with support from firefighters across England and in parts of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Many crews only took emergency 999 calls and refused to participate in fire prevention work. Action was held in Merseyside, Essex, Wiltshire, Bedfordshire, Norfolk, Somerset, Devon and parts of Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, the West Midlands, and Derbyshire.

The following day, the Salford workers returned to work in the evening, but were then suspended again as they refused to use the equipment. On the same day, the Fire Brigades Union announced that it would ballot 2,000 members in Manchester after talks with management failed to reach a settlement.

The Greater Manchester County Fire Officer, Barry Dixon, condemned the strike as "illegal" and added that he would only allow the staff to return to work if they agreed to "undertake the normal duties of a firefighter."

The FBU has called on the management of Greater Manchester County Fire Service to make a "sensible and constructive decision" at a meeting set to be held on May 20.

Following the 2002 national firefighters' strike, a new pay deal including an incremental 16 percent rise was agreed upon. Firefighters had expected a pay increase of 3.5 percent last November as a result. Talks on this backdated pay deal broke down last week.

The Office of Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott said in a statement that the strike was without any justification, adding that the "union and its members must recognise the June 2003 settlement made payment of salary increases dependent on progress in modernisation and this will be put in jeopardy by further industrial action".

UK rail unions threaten strike action

At time of going to press, rail union leaders are expected to announce the first national rail strike for almost a decade. Reports of possible "maximum disruption" by a series of selective strikes by Network Rail signallers and other staff whose response to a national ballot is to be announced imminently.

The 7,000 maintenance workers, station staff and signallers, in particular, have the ability to halt services, preventing the privatised rail operators from running trains, and triggering cancellations on all routes.

A signal workers' dispute in 1994 brought the system repeatedly to a halt: in the fragmented privatised industry, Network Rail's employees remain the only group capable of paralysing the entire 11,000-mile

network.

Members of the RMT union at Network Rail are understood to have voted in favour of the stoppages, which will bring trains to a halt late next week unless agreement is reached over pay, pensions and benefits.

Bob Crow, general secretary of the RMT, has threatened strikes that could lead to closure of the network for 48 hours. There is expected to be disruption over three days, possibly starting on Friday next week and affecting the bank holiday weekend.

RMT members at London Underground are also expected to vote in favour of walkouts, which would be coordinated with stoppages on the national network next month.

The RMT, which is also balloting London Underground workers in connection with a separate pay offer, may try to coordinate walkouts to disrupt commuter services in London and the southeast.

UK prison service staff prepare to take 24-hour strike

Staff working in the prison service across much of Britain are preparing to take 24-hour strike action on May 28. It will be the first time that staff have taken action in more than a quarter of a century.

Amicus, the largest union representing industrial staff working in the prison service, gave notice May 19 that its members will stage a 24-hour strike in protest at an imposed pay deal that amounts to 1 percent for the majority of staff. The prison officers received a far higher settlement. The industrial staff feel that they have been undervalued and treated inequitably for too long.

Temporary art workers' and technicians' strike disrupts Cannes Film Festival

At the opening ceremony of the Cannes festival on May 12, some 100 demonstrators supporting the ongoing temporary art workers' and technicians' strike in France were dispersed by police outside the main festival hall.

Before the festival, representatives of the coordination of temporary art workers, the Confédération du Travail trade union (CGT), and the Society of film Makers (SRF) had promised not to disturb the course of the festival. In return, film industry management guaranteed the art workers a platform to publicise their demands. The leadership of the movement has signalled to the government that they will be satisfied by the possibility of some negotiations regarding changes to the protocol of June 2003. The demands are reduced to having a "Clear Calendar" in terms of negotiations with the government. Many workers have demanded the abolition of the total protocol of June 2003.

On May 15, about 200 art workers distributed leaflets in the city of Cannes and held discussions with the local population. A further demonstration of 1,000 art workers, supported by filmmaker Michael Moore and anti-globalisation protester José Bové, rallied behind the slogan, "Health, Culture, Education: The same struggle! The dough governs!" They were halted by the riot police CRS before reaching the festival building. About 100 of the demonstrators occupied the Star Cinema, at which some were arrested. In the evening, there was a confrontation in front of the Cannes commissioner's department, where

art workers demanded those arrested be released.

Police arrested more protesters, resulting in some being injured. In the course of this violence, police prevented several TV journalists from filming the events. Some were badly injured and had their cameras smashed.

The following day, a delegation of the temporary art workers met Minister of Culture Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, who made some promises. He said that all art workers having worked 507 hours in the course of 12 months could claim the newly created "emergency fund" (of 92 euros a month). He has also indicated that a section of the temporary workers in the art sector who are not artists, such as technicians, may be excluded under the assurance system.

Since December 31 of last year, new regulations regarding the unemployment assurance scheme have been in operation. This was signed in June 2003 by a minority of trade unions, including the CFDT. Under this agreement, 18 percent of the 100,000 temporary art workers are losing most of their benefits. Since the beginning of this year, the temporary art workers have had to work 507 hours during a six-month period instead of during one year, as an old regulation of 1936 had prescribed.

Workers strike at the Jules Verne College in France

Since March 26, technical and service staff at the Jules Verne College at Grande-Synthe have held strike action. The industrial action has also won the support of teachers. The staff are opposing cuts in about the half the technical and service personal of all schools in the Dunkerque region, to which the Jules Verne College belongs.

The teachers joined the movement protesting the axing of three teachers' jobs and seven of 12 teaching assistant places. On April 8, the teachers held a strike, and at the end of the Easter holidays parents of pupils at the college joined the protests. Some 50 protesters have blocked the entrance of the school since May 6. On May 11, the administrative academic inspection announced that the four technical and service places will continue and two additional jobs will be created in September.

French energy workers continue strikes and protests

On May 19, the council of ministers will discuss a law changing the main energy public enterprises into joint-stock companies. On July 1, a private market of energy distribution will be opened.

On the same day, the unions Confédération General du Travail (CGT), Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT), Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (CFTC) and Force Ouvrière (FO) called a national day of action. They called for a two-hour strike from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and other protest actions such as interruptions of electricity supply, meetings, and demonstrations. The CGT trade union called only for a 24-hour strike.

In the Gironde region, public streetlighting was interrupted for some hours on the night of May 18, with some 80 percent of public lighting totally interrupted. Further trade unions activities are planned for May 27 and June 15.

French rail workers strike

French railroad employees walked off the job last week, causing delays in local train travel but leaving international service largely unaffected.

The 36-hour strike began May 12 and lasted for three days. The rail workers' union called the strike to protest plans to reorganise the freight sector of the national railway. The union has said that the three-year plan could lead to at least 2,500 jobs being axed.

Strike notice by French firefighters over classification

French professional firefighters in the trade unions CGT, FO and FASPP (autonomous) have issued a strike notice for May 27, a day of demonstrations in several cities, in a demand for effective classification of their line of work within the "dangerous and unhealthy professions."

The firemen will down tools in Lille, Lyon, Marseilles, Strasbourg, Toulouse and Rennes.

Transport workers' strike continues in Norway

The strike by Norwegian transport workers entered its third week on May 17. The industrial action is being held in a dispute over pay and benefits. More than 1,800 workers, mainly drivers, are involved in the dispute. Many workers have been locked out by the companies that employ them since the dispute began.

This week, food wholesaler NorgesGruppen locked out 70 union employees from its warehouse in Bergen. More than 400 other workers were locked out in the counties Hordaland, Møre og Romsdal, Sør-Trondelag and Troms. In many stores, the strike has meant the almost non-availability of eggs, butter and cheese.

Brewery workers' stoppage begins in Norway

This week, brewery workers began industrial action in Norway to protest growth in the temporary workers' market in the industry. The action involves 2,560 full-time brewery employees and has halted all production. The industrial action has also hit production at factories that produce soft drinks.

Due to the current transport strike action in Norway, breweries are unable to import beer from Sweden or Denmark.

The Norwegian Food and Allied Workers Union are demanding the right to veto hiring decisions made by employers.

Journalists' dispute enters second week in Norway

On May 12, journalists in Norway began a nationwide strike in a dispute over pension rights and other contract issues. The stoppage was called by the Norwegian Journalist Union (NJ) and has hit Norway's major newspapers *Aftenposten*, *VG*, *Dagbladet* and *Dagens Næringsliv* as well as regional papers. Some 3,000 journalists at 84 media companies are involved in the action.

This week, management at the newspapers met with the trade union but were unable to reach agreement. The trade union is on record that offers and an agreement must come from the association of media companies (MBL) and not from individual newspapers. On May 19, the NJ announced that it might involve an additional 390 members at 36 more media companies in the dispute. Were this to happen, it would affect the *Vårt Land*, *Nationen* and *Dagsavisen* newspapers.

Middle East

Five Israeli banks declare labour dispute

First International Bank workers' committee chairman Hanoch Livneh last week asked the Histadrut (General Federation of Labour) to declare a labour dispute in the entire banking sector. Livneh's request was on behalf of five banks: United Mizrahi Bank, First International Bank of Israel, Union Bank of Israel, Mercantile Discount Bank and Bank Otsar Hahayal.

The banks are protesting against proposals to establish a third large banking group by merging small and medium-sized banks, which would mainly serve big borrowers. Many top officials, including Governor of the Bank of Israel David Klein, support the idea in order to increase competition in Israel's banking system.

Livneh said the establishment of a third banking group would almost exclusively serve large borrowers while hurting households. He also claimed that the mergers needed to create a third banking group would cause hundreds, and possibly thousands, of layoffs of bank employees.

The request to the Histadrut is on behalf of 8,500 bank employees. The Histadrut is scheduled to discuss the matter with representatives from the five banks, and is expected to accede to the request.

Meanwhile, in a separate dispute, the Bank Discount Employees' Committee announced May 12 that to prevent privatisation, it will not provide information to contenders bidding for the acquisition of the bank.

Employee Committee Chairman Ricky Becher said employees working under a personal contract who cooperate with the buyers and provide information in violation of the committee decision will find themselves removed from the bank.

In addition, bank employees intend to hold protest vigils in front of the

home of Minister of Finance Binyamin Netanyahu and adopt additional unspecified industrial action measures aimed at the disruption of the ministry's work

Israeli school teachers strike

The Association of Secondary School Teachers went on a one-day strike May 20, and are set to continue disruptive action to the end of the week, closing all after-school activities.

Teaching unions are planning a nationwide strike to protest government plans to cut 30,000 classroom hours and fire 2,000 teachers. Teachers Association Chairman Ran Erez said the teachers have no other recourse by which to protest the cuts in what he described as "the living flesh of the educational system."

As part of the protest, the teachers said they wouldn't hand in scores on pre-matriculation exams taken by high school pupils to improve their overall grades. Scores will go into escrow, according to the union.

Jerusalem municipality workers declare strike while hundreds protest

Jerusalem municipality workers have declared a labour dispute and are threatening to go on a general strike in two weeks, when the cooling-off period expires. They are protesting against municipality plans to deduct strike days from their pay. The municipality workers went on strike in February.

Hundreds of Kiryat Gat municipality workers, who have not been paid for two months, blocked intersections in the town on May 20, disrupting traffic and preventing hundreds of employees at the local Intel and Bagir plants from going to work. The workers lifted the blockade only after the police intervened. The workers blocked intersections in the town the day before, as well.

Groups of municipal workers also blockaded themselves inside the municipality and set up a protest tent across the street from the mayor's home.

Africa

Striking Kenyan workers stand up to threats

Striking workers at Kenyan power stations have refused to return to work despite threats from management and the government.

The strikers' demands are for the removal of a permanent secretary, a review of the current collective bargaining agreement, changes to salary levels, provision of protective clothing, settlement of accident insurance claims (unpaid since 1992), and payment of arrears of overtime and shift allowances for 2001-2002.

KenGen supplies more than 70 percent of Kenya's electricity; the other 30 percent comes from independent power producers.

On May 17, the company threatened the workers with disciplinary measures if they failed to return to work by 7:45 the next morning, claiming that the strike was illegal. One day later, Labour Minister Ali Mwakwere branded the strike illegal, saying that the Kenya Electrical Trade and Allied Workers Union (KETAWU) had not issued the required 21-day notice to the ministry.

The strikers were said to be holding firm in the face of these threats and have vowed not to return until their demands have been met. Peter Chomba, KETAWU national vice-chairman, said the union was "warning the management that we might even take a step further and switch off the turbines if they do not respond to our grievances by today."

Staff at the Kenya Power and Lighting Company (KPLC) withdrew their strike threat the week before the KETAWU strike and agreed to discuss with management. KETAWU leaders said that if KenGen employees were victimised for taking strike action, KPLC workers would come out on strike in sympathy.

Kenyan local government workers' strikers threatened

Striking local government workers in Nairobi have been threatened with losing their jobs unless they return to work. Town Clerk F. R. Magaju has described the strike, which began on May 11, as illegal. Kent Mukoya, the

union's Nairobi branch secretary, is currently under arrest.

The workers are striking in protest at non-payment of their salary arrears, which stand at more than Sh276 million (\$3.5 million). They have not yet received payment of their March salaries.

Peter Njoroge, chairman of the Kenya Local Government Workers Union, said, "We are not cowed by the town clerk's threats and we want to assure our members that the strike is still on."

Zimbabwe nurses strike

Nurses at hospitals and polyclinics in Zimbabwe's capital Harare have taken strike action over a salary claim. They are demanding the city council implement a 100 percent pay increase, following a previous 100 percent rise they received in January. The chairman of the Harare Municipal Workers' Union, Cosmas Bungu, explained that the January award was not enough to keep pace with the rising cost of living, with inflation now running at about 600 percent. Bungu pointed out that the nurses' current earnings were so low that they were living below the poverty line, and that some nurses did not even have uniforms and protective clothing. He said, "We presented our grievances to the City of Harare, in writing, to the acting mayor on 23 April, but no action was taken. That's why we have resorted to going on strike."

Lecturers strike in Zambia

Lecturers at the University of Zambia (UNZA), Lusaka, have been on strike since last Monday to demand adequate housing and other benefits. The members of the UNZA lecturers and the researchers union (UNZALRU) have taken indefinite strike action because they have no proper accommodation. They are demanding that the university sell them land at reasonable prices so they can build their own houses. "We shall not resume work until our demands are sorted out," said the union's president, Thomas Mabwe. He said the lecturers were also demanding the university management sign a new collective agreement with the union, as the previous one had expired two months ago.



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