

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

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Europe

Strike threatens to disrupt Cannes film festival

French film production workers have been on strike since last summer in protest at reforms that have drastically cut their benefits. They have threatened to protest at the Cannes film festival, which began on May 12.

Until January, France's 100,000 arts industry employees qualified for year-round unemployment benefit if they worked for just three months in a year. But changes introduced by the government reduced the amount of benefits, while tightening the requirements to qualify for them.

Protesters plan to carry out small-scale protests to get their message into the public domain. Last weekend around 100 artists and technicians blocked a shipment of movie reels headed for Cannes. The protesters stood in front of the gate at a warehouse in Garges-les-Gonesse, Paris, where the reels were being delivered. Hundreds of other workers from Paris, Limoges, Nancy, Nantes, Rennes and Marseilles were reportedly on their way to the French Riviera city to carry out unspecified actions that have been planned over the past few days.

Some French cineastes with works in the festival have signed a statement of support for the workers' campaign.

The French government has outlined an emergency plan to settle the strike, pledging 20 million euros to a fund to pay unemployment benefits. Government officials have said the fund would make payouts over a limited period to those who worked 507 hours over a 12-month period. The CGT arts workers' union has rejected the deal and has warned the festival might still be disrupted.

Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin has urged new talks with the strikers.

Last summer, the Avignon Theatre Festival had to be cancelled due to protests by performing artists. The Cannes Film Festival, at which up to 15,000 top movie actors and media representatives will be treading the red carpet, could develop into a major embarrassment for the organisers and the government if a visible protest develops.

Workers at British chocolate firm strike over pay

Workers at the confectionary chocolate producer Cadbury World shop are on strike as of May 13, in a pay dispute. A spokesman for the staff said, "[T]he staff in the factory immediately next door are being paid £2 an hour more than the Cadbury World staff for doing the same job."

The Cadbury World shop staff are paid £5.61 an hour compared to the factory shop staff rate of £7.61.

Britain faces firefighters strike as pay deal collapses

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) suspended its annual conference on its opening day May 11. Delegates were urged to ready themselves for a new round of strike action after talks on a 3.5 per cent productivity payment failed to reach agreement and the deal that ended last year's strikes fell apart.

The 300-strong conference in Bridlington, North Yorkshire, voted overwhelmingly to adjourn for a month and to withdraw from a programme of "modernisation" that had been agreed as part of a package to end nationwide stoppages. The postponement gives union and management four weeks to negotiate a deal and avoid an FBU decision to scrap its link with the Labour Party.

Andy Gilchrist, the general secretary of the FBU, said the exact date of the new assembly was yet to be fixed. It is thought it will take place after the local elections on June 10, a particularly sensitive time for the Labour government.

Fire authorities are seeking the ability to force staff to undertake non-emergency work between midnight and 7am. At the moment firefighters normally only respond to 999 calls between those times. Gilchrist said the issue was not really about "stand-down time," it was more to do with "management wanting to tell us what to do just because they can."

He said that firefighters were allowed to sleep because they are often on duty 30 hours out of 39. "Sometimes firefighters are called upon to work at extreme levels of exertion," said Gilchrist.

Union delegates resolved to consult the FBU's 50,000 members over the next month. This will be followed by a vote to hold a ballot on industrial action when the conference is reconvened.

Greek hotel employees threaten to strike during Olympics

Hotel workers in Athens have threatened to strike during the Olympics if their wages are not increased for the games. Union leaders said that employees of many of the city's major hotels will strike during the August 13-29 Olympics if they do not get an eight percent wage increase and a two-month bonus for work during the games.

The union collectively bargains with private hotel operators, but union leaders have asked the government to agree to their demands. A four-hour work stoppage is planned for May 27 and a 24-hour nationwide strike is scheduled for June 17. The average monthly wage for a hotel employee is \$740.

Middle East

Israeli port workers hire campaign manager

The Ashdod Port workers' committees took the decision to hire media consultant Tal Zilberstein, in a struggle against the Finance Ministry regarding structural changes at the ports. Zilberstein, who served as campaign manager for Labor's Ehud Barak in the 1999 elections, also managed the campaign of the cellular phone companies during a controversy over allegedly illegal antennae.

The Ashdod, Haifa, and Eilat port workers plan work stoppages, possibly including strikes and demonstrations. Recent negotiations have stalled.

Histadrut labour federation representative, Dorit Tena-Parchik, in a report to the court, attacked the treasury's motives. She claimed the legislation is not just about restructuring the ports. Rather it is an "attempt to break organised labour through legislation and to weaken the status of the workers' representatives."

Africa

Zimbabwean police break up demonstration by striking printers

Police in Zimbabwe moved against a demonstration by striking printing workers on May 10, jailing at least 43 and dispersing more than 400. The demonstration was held in the Willowvale industrial area, in defiance of an edict branding it "illegal," as part of the printers' campaign to win a pay increase.

Inspector Thomas Chinhadada said that the police would not allow any illegal demonstrations and slandered the workers by claiming that "even thieves will be at liberty to join in such demonstrations and take advantage of the confusion to loot from the companies."

He announced that the police will charge "the [Graphic Printing Workers'] Union secretary-general and treasurer with public violence, while the rest of the suspects have the option of paying admission of guilt fines of \$25,000 each [US\$5]... or face court prosecution."

Nigerian road workers strike

Workers carrying out maintenance on the 102 kilometre road from Talata Mafara to Sokoto in Nigeria have been on strike for more than three weeks, in protest at the non-payment of their wages for the last four months. This has left many of them facing serious hardship.

The workers are employed by Sterling Nigeria plc., which won the contract to repair the road last year. Sterling had offered to pay the casual workers, but expected the permanent workers to wait for another month. They refused to do so, since their hardship is as severe as that of the casuals.

"They came yesterday and said that they are waiting for a signal from Kaduna to know what to do, but we will not go back until we are paid our full salaries of three months," one of the strikers said.

Company officials said the problem was due to the Federal Ministry of Works failing to pay the company. The Minister of State for Works confirmed this, and said it was due to the delay in approval and signing of the budget.

South African meat workers strike over pay

Around 2,000 meat workers at three plants in South Africa have gone on strike to demand a pay increase of 10.25 percent. The plants are owned by Rainbow Chicken, whose management is offering an increase of seven percent. The workers' salaries range between R2,300 (US\$336) and R3,500 (US\$511) per month.

Many of the strikers protested outside the Rainbow Chicken head offices in Durban on May 7. The company has locked out the workers and has ordered them not to block the traffic entering and leaving the company premises. It is also demanding that 40 percent of the staff can be employed as temporary workers.

Three of the four unions at the plants are taking part in the industrial action. Moses Manake, the national spokesperson of the National Union of Food Beverage Wine Spirits and Allied Workers, said, "We are worried about attempts by the company to divide our members by approaching them individually to accept its offer. This amounts to undermining the collective bargaining process as well as the Labour Relations Act."



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