

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

8 October 2004

Amsterdam: thousands rally against government austerity measures

On October 2, more than 200,000 people demonstrated in Amsterdam, Holland against government austerity measures and welfare cuts. Held in Museum Square it was the largest protest for 20 years.

The right-wing coalition government of Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende plans to cut early retirement entitlements, raise the retirement age and reform the social security contributions system from next January. The Balkenende government also plans to introduce changes in the system of invalidity benefits and health insurance. It has already imposed a freeze on civil service salaries and the minimum wage.

The rally was organised by three of the country's union federations—the FNV, CNV and MHP. Many of those attending, however, carried homemade banners and wore t-shirts declaring, “the cup is full”, “the Netherlands deserve better”, and “No to longer working hours”. Recent opinion polls show that 60 percent of Dutch people oppose the reforms.

Last week Social Affairs Minister Art Jan de Geus said he was willing to reopen talks with unions and industry on parts of the early retirement reforms. Following the protest in Amsterdam one of the coalition government partners, the D66 party, called on the government to resume negotiations with the unions.

The demonstration follows a rally of tens of thousands last month in Rotterdam, the world's largest port, to protest the reforms. During that day of action the city's dockers held industrial action alongside public transport workers in Rotterdam and The Hague.

Spanish shipyard workers continue protests

Spanish shipyard workers continued their anti-privatisation demonstrations and protests on October 1 by blockading traffic in the port of Ferrol in the northwestern region of Galicia. According to reports, up to 4,000 shipyard workers halted traffic for 20

minutes with barricades, some of which were set on fire. The protest followed another strike and demonstration earlier in the week at the yard when some 10,700 walked off the job.

The workers are in dispute with the state shipbuilder Izar, which controls ten yards owned by government industrial holding company SEPI. Under plans to partly privatise the shipyards, SEPI proposes to separate naval dockyard activities, the most profitable, from civil shipyards which are due to be partly privatised.

The future of the shipyards is in doubt due to competition from Asia and the threat of bankruptcy amid European Union demands that Izar repay 300 million euros (\$372.8 million) in aid that the EU said breached competition rules.

In the city of Gijon in Asturias, 200 students joined 410 workers in a march on the city centre to protest against the government's treatment of the shipyard workers.

Baggage handlers at Gatwick, London continue strike

On October 6, baggage handlers at Gatwick airport in London continued strike action over their ongoing dispute with baggage handling company Servisair over workloads. The workers, members of the Transport and General Workers Union, stopped work at 0800 BST for 12 hours. They have already held two previous stoppages and further industrial action is planned for October 8 and next week.

The union says that changes in working practices have resulted in “exhausting workloads” for its 600 members employed by the company. It claimed that the strikes had cost Servisair £500,000. A union spokeswoman said, “This is a costly dispute for Servisair as they ignore their clients elsewhere to bring managers in on strike days. The support from our members remains strong and committed to taking more strike action if that is necessary”.

The company claims responded that the strikes have

had little impact on flights and that figures for the strike on September 30 showed of 161 flights, or 95 percent, left on time, with 20 percent ahead of schedule.

Servisair is one of four baggage handling companies at Gatwick and covers more than 20 airlines including Ryan air, Air Malta, Britannia, Thomas Cook, Easyjet, Excel Airways, Mytravel, Continental and Delta.

Teachers in Croatia strike

Teachers in Croatia held strike action during International Teachers' Day on October 5. According to government and unions estimates between 70 and 80 percent of employees in the educational system joined the strike with the majority of these from higher education.

Teachers in elementary and secondary schools, as well as in the universities and scientific institutions participated in the industrial action, which was called over a number of issues, including salaries and the long-term funding of the education and science sectors.

Minister of Education Dragan Primorac said that he would ask for more money in the State Budget next year but insisted the unions had to work with the government based on the formula "Partnership yes, but no blackmail".

Zambian Telecom workers strike

Workers at the Zambia Telecommunications Company (ZAMTEL) held a sit-down strike for four days from September 27. They were demanding a 50-percent increase in salaries and removal of the managing director and the director of human resources.

Union leaders failed to persuade the employees to resume work, even after the intervention of Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) president Leonard Hikaumba. Workers said they would only end their action after investigations commenced into the management, and especially managing director Mutesha and Dr Chilao Mutesa, the director of human resources.

Hikaumba told the *Times of Zambia* that the union federation had "tried to persuade them but they have refused to resume work. ZCTU has realised that there is a problem at ZAMTEL to an extent where the relationship between management and workers is not good," Hikaumba said.

About 50 workers in Lusaka were suspended as a result of the strike. The Zambian government then ordered an end to the strike in favour of negotiations

between the two sides.

The acting Communications and Transport Minister for the Zambian government, Patrick Kalifungwa, said in a statement issued on September 29 that the workers and their union, the National Union of Communication Workers, had decided to unconditionally call off the stoppage, and that all charges and suspensions would be dropped.

The *Times of Zambia* reported that most workers at the ZAMTEL offices in Lusaka had resumed work on October 2, but those present said they were continuing with the go-slow until their demands had been met.

Nigerian nurses and college staff strike

Nurses and health workers at the Igbobi Orthopaedic Hospital in Lagos walked out at the end of September to demand the payment of salary arrears. Three health unions, the Nurses and Midwives Association of Nigeria, the Senior Staff Union and the Medical and Health Workers Union, are involved in the indefinite strike.

Nigerian newspaper *PMNews* reported that many of the patients had started leaving the hospital to seek medical attention elsewhere. A member of the Joint Action Committee—formed to coordinate the strike—said that the walk out was "just to warn the management. If they failed to heed our call, we will take a more decisive action."

Meanwhile, the Nigerian education sector is also being hit by strike action. The Association of Senior Civil Servants of Nigeria (ASCSN) has advised parents and students to disregard the media claims of a settlement in the national dispute between staff at the Federal Colleges of Education and the Federal Ministry of Education (FME). A statement by the ASCSN accused FME management of misleading the public and warned parents that strike action would go ahead from October 2 as planned and should not send their children to school from that date.



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