

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

22 October 2004

Europe

Public sector workers strike throughout Russia

Workers in the public sector in Russia took strike action on October 20 in a dispute over low pay, contracts and working conditions. The strike was called by several trade union federations and it is estimated that more than one million workers were involved and up to three million attended public rallies.

This is the second series of nationwide protests by trade unions this year, following rallies across Russia on June 10.

In Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski 100 employees at cultural, public health and educational institutions held a rally against low wages and social guarantees in the city's central square.

Some 5,000 teachers, doctors and cultural workers in the region of Ulan-Ude took part in a protest meeting against low wages in the budget-financed sectors. The workers passed a resolution at the rally supporting a demand by the Association of Trade Unions of Workers of the Non-Production Sphere for a 50 percent wage increase this year and their indexation by two-fold in 2005.

Some 50,000 workers of 700 budget-financed institutions participated in protest action in the Republic of Buryatia. In the territory of Altai 34,000 teachers in some 1,500 schools struck. An estimated 80,000 people including doctors, cultural workers and workers of the communal sector took part in the rallies, marches and pickets. They demanded wage increases and the preservation of easy terms of payment for communal services in rural areas.

In the Sverdlovsk region 50,000 workers struck for an hour and in the Orenburg Region 100,000 workers held strikes and demonstrations. Further strikes were held in the Volgograd region, where some 21,000 workers participated and all secondary schools and 80 percent of nursery schools were closed in the town of Kovrov in the Vladimir region. Teachers also struck in 100 educational institutions of the Ivanovo region. In the Republic of Karelia an estimated 2,000 workers formed a "solidarity chain" in Petrozavodsk along the central streets of the city. Teachers, doctors, cultural workers and workers at a number of industrial enterprises took part. The main demand of the workers was an immediate indexation of wages in accordance with the inflation rate, as well as the preservation of state guarantees on the terms and the amount of the remuneration of work.

In the Nizhny Novgorod region, 180 out of 350 cultural institutions and 54 labour collectives of public health institutions struck, as well as workers at some 1,500 out of 2,200 educational institutions and nursery schools.

Bus drivers at UK's Heathrow Airport strike

On October 18, bus drivers who shuttle Heathrow Airport workers between terminals held a 24-hour strike over pay. The staff, employed by Menzies Aviation, are calling for a 5.4 percent increase in their £8.12 per hour wage.

The 73 workers, members of the Transport and General Workers Union, operate the Connect2work services for check-in, ground staff, retailers and

office staff at the west London complex.

Baggage handlers at UK's Gatwick Airport to strike

The Transport and General Workers Union has announced that several hundred baggage handlers at Gatwick Airport in southern England are to strike for 48 hours at the start of the school holidays next weekend.

The action is the seventh strike in recent weeks in a long-running dispute with Servisair company over working practices and the suspension of a union official.

The company responded that it would use "well-proven" contingency plans in an attempt to weaken the industrial action and said that during the previous stoppages, 96 percent of flights departed on time and more than 30 percent departed early. Servisair, which employs 600 baggage handlers, is one of four baggage handling companies at Gatwick Airport.

Middle East

Israeli regional municipality workers begin strike

Shfaram municipality employees launched a strike on October 19, after not being paid their September wages and not receiving pension funds for the previous six months. The 120 workers, who said the strike will continue until further notice, barricaded themselves inside the council building and barred the entrance to its offices.

Chairman of the workers' board, Karem Sabah, said the Interior Ministry promised to transfer the funds to the Shfaram municipality but the workers still haven't been paid. The employees, he said, were unable to prepare for Ramadan, a Muslim month of fasting that started last week. He also said the workers fear that they will not receive the money before the end of the month.

"We will not resume work and might intensify the protest if the Interior Ministry and the municipalities don't transfer the money into the employees' accounts," he added.

The mayor of the Arab-Israeli municipality, Oursan Yasin, has not spoken with the workers yet.

Fire fighters in the Western Galilee who did not receive their September wages closed Nahariya fire station October 19. Several minor strikes have been launched across the country since the nationwide municipal councils' strike ended last month. The National Labour Court ordered the government to pay the back pay owed to municipal workers who had been denied salaries for many months in a dispute between the treasury and local councils.

Israeli chemical works employees blockade factory

One hundred and sixty employees of Jordan Valley-based Sefen Industries and Investments Ltd., a maker of decorated laminates, struck on October 13. The workers demonstrated in front of the factory gates, burned tyres, and hurled abuse at company managers and general manager Michael Kremerman.

The Histadrut (General Federation of Labour in Israel) Kinneret District declared an industrial dispute at Sefen four months ago, because of a prolonged dispute between the company's management and employees. Sefen's management announced that work at the factory was continuing. Sefen is controlled by the Kremerman family, which has previously closed

down two other factories, Etz Lavud and Ashkelon Plywood.

At going to press; the dispute is being wound up, with an agreement expected between Histadrut workers committee and Sefen to accept a proposal by the District Labour court.

In a separate labour dispute, hundreds of employees of Makhteshim Chemical Works went on strike on October 13, blocking the entry of raw materials and the departure of finished goods from the company's factory in Ramat Hovav. The workers were protesting management's decision to outsource some work, despite requests by the employees not to do so.

Histadrut declares dispute at Israeli supermarket chain

Israel's union body declared a dispute on October 16 at supermarket chain Super-Sol's. The chain has 7,500 employees, of whom 6,500 are unionised. After a mandatory 14-day cooling-off period, the organised workers are legally permitted to strike.

Yoram Orenstein, the chairman of the Histadrut's commerce and marketing division, says the dispute is over the prolongation of negotiations regarding a collective employment agreement.

Orenstein noted that Super-Sol's "streamlining" has included scaling down its operations and cutting jobs. Unprofitable branches were closed. Now the management is avoiding fulfilment of its duties toward the workers and unfairly dragging out the negotiations, he claimed.

Ariela Sisu, chair of the Super-Sol labour committee, claims that the management is restructuring the company at the expense of the workers. She says the management is offering a collective employment agreement in which the workers agree to forgo pay rises for five years and to the eradication of benefits they had received in the past, such as automatic promotions and seniority benefits.

She accused management of reducing overtime and sending the employees on forced vacation, while also trying to impair their freedom to unionise.

Other representatives claimed that workers were under heavy pressure at stores. Northern Sharon representative Shlomit Ben-Haim said, "Personnel has been drastically cut. Tellers are worked from 7:00 am until 3:00 pm without a break, while they are automatically docked 30 minutes, as if they had rested. The pressure on workers is crazy."

Workers continue protests and strikes at Israel banks

Following the escalation of a dispute at the Bank of Israel, the central bank sent a letter to employees last week saying that those who follow a labour union decision not to deliver cash to ATM machines will be barred from coming to work.

For several months, Bank of Israel employees have been protesting a planned 20 percent wage cut. A union decision was also taken last week to block currency department employees from refilling cash machines. The central bank responded strongly to the protest, saying that any worker intending to disrupt the transfer of money to the ATMs will not be allowed to return to work. Rather than being fired outright, workers would have to sign a written agreement agreeing to distance themselves from the dispute. Workers will also be docked pay for the time they miss, the central bank said.

Bank of Israel staff are also preparing to aid their fellow workers at Israel Discount Bank, who are involved in a dispute against government plans to sell off its majority stake in the bank, and up to now have carried out action such as not cooperating in preparing the quarterly report. Earlier this month, the bank's 5,000-plus employees were ordered by the court to end the action. Israel Discount Bank narrowly avoided having its shares suspended from the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange, when it filed its quarterly report 33 days late and only hours before suspension.

The bank's national workers committee chair Ricky Bachar said the dispute was due to; "the burden placed upon the bank's employees, and the long hours they work without compensation ... Work loads have crushed employees for the past two years, but no one seems to think they deserve compensation. Employees haven't received a bonus for 10 years,

while the bank boasted second-quarter 2004 returns of 15 percent."

Now the Bank of Israel workers are considering not cooperating with the financial and ethical checks that ought to be carried out on the parties that have submitted bids for the government's stake in Discount Bank.

Central bank workers are protesting over several points of dispute including automatic promotions, use of more contractual staffers and moving to contributory pensions.

Meanwhile, United Mizrahi Bank workers committee decided October 19 to relaunch strike action after the collapse of negotiations with management over workers rights once the bank merges with its subsidiary, Bank Tefahot. Branch workers will hold information sessions during office hours. The main point of dispute is the bonus employees will receive after the merger. The bank wants to pay half a month's salary to each employee at a cost of NIS 11 million (\$US2.5 million), while the workers are demanding one and a half months' bonus, or NIS 33 million.

Africa

Mozambican miners strike over pay and safety

On October 14, around 250 miners went on strike at the Chipanga 11 coal mine in Mozambique, in protest at the unfair pay structure and the lack of protective clothing such as helmets, boots, and uniforms.

The strikers blocked the entrance to the mine on October 19, using logs, barrels and the like, to prevent vehicles from entering, according to the Maputo newspaper *Noticias*.

Labour director for the western province of Tete, Rafael dos Santos, said, "The workers are furious, and they are right, because it is unacceptable that workers at a coal mining company go underground without protective clothing ... the employer does not have any ambulance on hand to respond in the event of any accidents, which are frequent in this kind of work."

The strikers have sworn to continue the action until their demands are met. They claim that they have been demanding a revision of the company's unfair wage structure since 2001.

Since the strike began, scores of trucks from clients, some from inside Mozambique, others from Malawi and Zambia, are queuing up outside the mine for loading.

General strike brings Benin to a halt

Four of Benin's five trade union federations called a three-day general strike on October 19, calling for pay increases for government employees, higher pensions for the old and lower fees for university students.

Civil service unions are demanding pay increases between 20 and 30 percent, after negotiations with the government broke down on October 1.

Government offices, schools and most of the banks were closed by the strike, and health services and radio and television broadcasts were minimal. Normal programmes were suspended on the government-run radio and television stations. Instead one song was played over and over: *Le pays va mal* (The country is doing badly) by Ivorian singer Tiken Jah Facoly.

The AFP news agency reported that most shops remained open, but in the economic capital of Cotonou, most businesses were closed due to the strike.

Only a week before, teachers had gone on strike with a similar set of demands.

The leader of the Confederation of Autonomous Unions (CSA), Guillaume Attigbe, criticised the government of President Mathieu Kerekou for treating the demands made by workers "lightly and with disdain".

Burundi nurses strike over poor working conditions

On October 11, nurses in hospitals and health centres across Burundi began a two-day strike to demand better working conditions.

Melance Hakizimana, the leader of the Syndicat libre des infirmiers du Burundi (Sylibu), the main trade union for nurses, told IRIN that striking was the only option because the government would not start talks with the

union.

The striking nurses listed 14 demands, including one for overtime pay. Hakizimana said the current arrangement was unacceptable. Nurses earn an extra 3,500 francs (\$US35) per month no matter how many hours they work.

Nurses were also demanding that the government recognise the risks their job entails, handling blood and sharp objects and treating patients suffering from transmittable diseases. “When there is an emergency sometimes we cannot properly protect ourselves,” Hakizimana said.

Another demand is for access to free health care. Hakizimana said it was wrong that nurses cared for others but did not have access to care when they fell ill.

Minister of Health Dr Jean Kamana told reporters that the public service health insurance company, known as Mutuelle, covered nurses. He claimed that means the government contributes to their health care because nurses only pay 20 percent of drugs prices and hospital bills.

The striking nurses resumed work on October 13, but if there is no agreement by October 25, then an all out stoppage is planned.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact