

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

26 November 2004

## Europe

### Teaching assistants in Brighton and Hove, England strike

On November 24, teaching assistants in Brighton and Hove, southern England began a 48-hour strike. The strike was called by several education trade unions including GMB and Unison that represent 700 of the 1,000 classroom assistants. The stoppage affected some 17,000 primary school children, as about 40 schools were closed.

The government recently agreed with trade unions that classroom assistants would be allowed to substitute for teachers and take on more responsibility in lessons—a measure that is a threat to qualified teachers and an attack on education. The agreement stipulated that many classroom assistants would receive pay rises to reflect their new roles. The unions have accused Brighton and Hove council of bypassing this by awarding pay rises but cutting the number of weeks a year staff are paid to work. The majority of teaching assistants under the council are paid for working 49.5 weeks a year and 52 weeks in special schools. The council now intends to slash contracts back to 44 weeks.

### Postal staff in Preston, England strike in pay and bonus dispute

Postal staff based at the Preston main delivery office in Lancashire, north England held a 24-hour strike this week that ended at midnight on November 24. The action followed the introduction of a new single delivery system. Staff claim that they were promised a bonus and pay rise backdated to April. The stoppage began following the breakdown in negotiations between the Communication Workers Union and management the previous day. No ordinary deliveries were being made in Preston for its duration.

### Staff at Birmingham International airport to ballot for action

Airport staff at Birmingham International Airport in

England are set to vote for strike action this week in a dispute over the ending of their final-salary scheme. Some 400 workers voted this week, with the result to be announced next Saturday. Were industrial action to take place it could occur over the busy Christmas holiday period.

Birmingham International Airport's owners plan to end the final-salary pension scheme to new employees and increase contributions for existing members by one percent.

Fire service staff will also strike should a vote for industrial action be authorised in the ballot. Under Civil Aviation Authority rules, the airport cannot operate without firefighters on duty. It is estimated that the airport that services about 260 flights a day could lose up to £300,000 a day if strike action was to be held over Christmas.

## Middle East

### Histadrut activists protest conditions at SuperPharm

Israeli police were called during a demonstration on November 17, outside a SuperPharm chain store branch in Ramat Aviv against working conditions at the chain. A group of 15 Histadrut trade union federation activists distributed flyers to passersby, protesting harmful work conditions such as the policy forbidding employees to sit down during an eight-hour shift.

Histadrut spokesman Avinoam Magen was briefly detained by police after he tried to enter the store. Magen was taken in handcuffs to a police van parked outside the Ramat Aviv mall and was questioned and released after half an hour.

SuperPharm store security guards blocked the entrance to the activists, along with reporters and photographers.

Flyers were also distributed at two Jerusalem malls by students from the Hebrew University's legal aid clinics. The students explained to guards, salespeople and other workers that the clinics would help them sue for damages if their health or dignity had been compromised at work.

Mall employees were asked to document their working conditions.

### **Israeli banking disputes continue**

On November 22, employees at Bank Tefahot stepped up their industrial action by shutting down the main branches in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Be'er Sheva, Netanya and Ashdod. The bank workers also refused to pass activity reports to regulators in response to stalled negotiations over conditions for Tefahot workers following the expected merger with United Mizrahi Bank in January.

On the same day, National Labor Court Judge Steve Adler rejected the Bank of Israel's (the central bank) request to force workers in the currency and foreign currency branches to stop their strike action. The court also rejected the bank's workers' committee proposal to expand the slowdown to include four other bank branches. Adler sent the case back to the Jerusalem Labour Court for deliberation, effectively maintaining the status quo in the long-standing dispute.

Israel Discount Bank is likely to miss its third-quarter filing deadline, as it did last quarter. The bank's workers' committee has petitioned the Tel Aviv Labour Court to allow employees to renew slowdowns. The committee claims that no progress has been made in negotiations over demands for the bank to increase staff at the 150 branches.

### **Africa**

#### **Pay withheld from Zimbabwean teachers**

Teachers in Mashonaland Central Province and Bulawayo, Zimbabwe have not received any pay after they took part in a three-day strike called by the Zimbabwe Teachers' Association (Zimta), which began on October 15. According to information received by the *Zimbabwe Standard* (Harare) "the Salaries Services Bureau (SSB) issued directives to banks to put the teachers' salaries on hold following instructions from the Public Service Commission (PSC)."

A teacher from Bulawayo told the paper, "We had our pay slips last month but we could not access the money.... We do not know our fate. Not a single teacher has received an explanation from the Ministry since last month. This month our names are not even appearing on the pay roll and I don't know what that means. They deliberately ignored us so that the examinations would go smoothly."

Another teacher described the enormous difficulties she and other affected teachers faced, struggling to survive in the harsh economic conditions in the country. She said,

"You can not imagine anyone going for two months without a salary these days. We are suffering. We do not even know whether we are on suspension or we have been expelled."

Teachers are among the lowest paid professionals workers in Zimbabwe.

### **Strike by photographers in Sierra Leone**

Photographers in Freetown are on strike in protest against the 80 percent increase in the fees of the photo studios. They have called on colleagues all over Sierra Leone to support their action.

Abdul Aziz, a spokesman for the strikers, told the *Independent* (Freetown) that the increase was "astronomical". He added that it means that customers now have to pay six thousand Leones (\$US2.45) for two pictures only.

On November 17 the strikers stormed the Central Police Station in Freetown.

### **Liberian plantation workers take strike action**

Plantation workers at the Firestone Plantations Company, Liberia, took strike action from the beginning of November. According to the *Analyst* (Monrovia), the workers accused their management of "allegedly deducting 37.5 percent from their earnings since 1992." The workers are demanding a full refund of the deductions.

The National Transitional Government of Liberia attempted to resolve the dispute by convening a discussion between the Firestone management, officials of the General Agricultural Workers' Union (GAWUL), and the Firestone Workers Union (FAWUL), under the chairmanship of the head of the Government Mediation Team.

At the meeting the strikers complained that Firestone management downplayed their concerns. The Government Mediation Team asked Firestone employees to "remain calm and continue to work" as the government looks into their complaints.



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