Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

12 November 2004

Europe

UK civil servants strike

On November 5, hundreds of thousands of UK civil servants took strike action throughout the country to protest government plans to slash up to 100,000 jobs. The Labour government is to close 37 social security offices and job centres across the UK in the first part of plans to cut up to 20 percent of civil service jobs.

The action was organised by the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) and involved workers in 160 government departments and agencies.

The union claimed that up to 200,000 civil servants had supported the 24-hour action that closed job centres, benefit departments and Customs. Driving examiners and staff for the Royal Parks also supported the stoppage. A number of famous public buildings were also shut by the action including the British Museum, the Science Museum and the British Library reading rooms.

During the course of the day some 1,200 workers joined a march in London, which ended with a rally at Westminster Cathedral Hall. But the government said it would ignore the protest, with Chancellor Gordon Brown insisting “we will not be diverted from these necessary changes”.

Italian Fiat workers strike

Auto workers employed by the Italian can manufacturer Fiat held strike action throughout the country on November 6. The four-hour strike was called against possible job cuts at the loss making company.

Called by the metalwork sections of Italy’s three largest trade unions, an estimated 3,000 workers gathered at the Mirafiori plant in Turin, Fiat’s headquarters, during the strike. The Termini Imerese plant in Sicily saw more than 90 percent of its staff engaged in the strike action according to union sources.

Fiat Auto indicated last month that it would end production of some of its larger sedans but claimed no job losses would result. But management have also announced the temporary closure and/or reduced production at three factories at the end of November, including Mirafiori and Termini Imerese.

Galway bus drivers in Ireland hold unofficial strike

Bus drivers in Galway, Ireland held an unofficial strike on November 9 in a dispute with Bus Éireann over staffing policies. The industrial action involved some 100 bus drivers who are members of the National Bus and Rail Union.

The stoppage led to the cancellation of virtually all city services and services to and from Galway. The company said that only a small number of buses left the city in the morning and that it was not certain they would return in the evening.

The unofficial action continued the following day causing further disruption to bus services in Galway and the west of Ireland. The stoppage ended with the intervention of the Labour Relations Commission who mediated an agreement between the drivers and Bus Éireann. Further negotiations are to take place on November 12.

Helsinki bus drivers strike

Bus drivers in the Helsinki region of Finland began strike action on November 11 in a dispute over working hours and contacts. The strike involves some 1,300 bus drivers and includes half of the buses serving the Greater Helsinki Metropolitan Area. In the city of Vantaa, all of the city’s internal bus lines have come to a standstill.

Drivers at three bus companies are participating in the action as they subcontract their services to the municipal and regional transport companies: Concordia Finland, Connex Espoo, and Connex Vantaa.

The dispute arose when trade union officials at the companies accused management of making changes to the contracts of part-time and temporary drivers that weaken the conditions of permanent full-time staff.

Management denounced the strike as illegal and have referred the dispute to the Labour Court.

Middle East

Egyptian miners stage strike

A protest by workers at the Abou Tartour phosphate mine in Egypt over administrative abuses and maltreatment, escalated into a strike and sit-in at the mine on October 28.

Police besieged the mine to prevent other workers joining their striking colleagues, and threatened to turn off ventilation fans, threatening the lives of the protesters.

The 1,200 strong workforce have been in dispute with mine management for over one year after the provision of milk and hygienic materials were revoked. The mine workers have also complained of a delay in the payment of their monthly wages.

Africa

Zimbabwean telecoms and post workers strike enters

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second month

The strike of Zimbabwean telecoms and postal workers has entered its second month. The action began on October 6, after the agreed salary increases for the first quarter of the year failed to materialise.

Management of Tel One and Zimpost have recently sent out over 3,000 suspension notices in an attempt to intimidate the strikers. Of the 4,000 workers employed by Tel One, 2,100 were issued with letters of suspension while at Zimpost, 980 workers were targeted out of a work force of 1,600. Both companies are entirely state-owned.

The workers belong to the Communications and Allied Services Workers Union of Zimbabwe (CASWUZ). The union general secretary, Gift Chimanikire, confirmed on November 6 that the letters had been received and that the union was negotiating with management in an attempt to reverse the suspensions while continuing to press for reasonable salaries.

Strikers told the *Zimbabwe Standard* that, "Senior managers are being feted with expensive vehicles and new office furniture but the companies go on to tell us that they have no money to pay the workers. The postal and telephone services are very crucial to the economy but management does not seem to realise this."

The newspaper reported that soldiers have been drafted in to do the jobs of striking Tel One workers, and Zimpost is employing casual workers to deliver letters.

Nigerian doctors on strike

A two-day national strike of Nigerian doctors began on November 8, in support of a demand for the payment of "outstanding emoluments and the implementation of government-approved basic salary increment".

The National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) called on "all medical doctors below the rank of consultant in health centres, comprehensive health centres, general hospitals, district hospital (states and federal), federal medical centres and teaching hospitals" to comply with its directive and support the strike. NARD has also given the government 21-days notice to settle outstanding arrears; otherwise it will call an all-out strike.

Vanguard (Lagos) visited Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) on the first day of the strike and reported that the national union's directive for the withdrawal of services had been carried out "to the letter". Most of the wards, including the Accident and Emergency ward and the Olikoye Ransome-Kuti Children's Emergency ward were significantly affected.

In a statement, NARD president Dr Jerry Oguzie explained that since November 2003, resident doctors have been paid salaries on a percentage basis, adding that many doctors receive only 15 days salary when they have worked for 30 days. Many of his members were owed more than three months salary.

General secretary of Association of Resident Doctors (ARD), at University College Hospital, Ibadan, Dr Obimakinde Obitad, told *PM News* (Lagos) that his members were being paid between 35 and 75 percent of their salaries.

He added that he hoped the strike would give a warning signal to the federal government. The ultimatum will expire on November 27, and if there is no progress, ARD members will meet in Port Harcourt to review the situation and possibly resort to an indefinite strike.

Nurses at four Zimbabwean clinics take strike action

Nurses at the four municipal clinics in Chitungwiza, near Harare, went on indefinite strike on November 8 to press for a 50 percent salary increment backdated to May 2004 and improved working conditions. The nurses are demanding payment of their October salaries, which they have not received, despite assurances from council officials.

The strike has resulted in most patients being turned away from the clinics. Serious cases are being referred to Chitungwiza General Hospital.

The nurses are complaining about council's failure to provide them with adequate protective clothing. One nurse told the *Herald* (Harare), "Most nurses are leaving council clinics for government and other private institutions where conditions of service are better. They are leaving every month and we are aware of some leaving next month. We fear for our lives because we are constantly exposed to health risks due to inadequate clothing."

On the second day of the strike the nurses met Misheck Shoko, mayor of Chitungwiza, to air their grievances. Shoko has denied that council nurses had not been paid their October salaries. He said that only council employees with accounts with a certain commercial bank had not received their salaries but he failed to name the bank involved.

Shoko admitted that the issue of protective clothing had come to his attention and said that he had directed the chairperson of the health committee to ensure that it was addressed.

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