

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

19 November 2004

Europe

Italian teachers strike

On November 15, seven of Italy's eight teachers' unions took strike action, closing many schools throughout the country. The unions have a joint membership of some 750,000 education staff. It is estimated that tens of thousands were involved in the day of action. The largest demonstration was held in Rome and saw many parents and schoolchildren turn out in support of teachers.

Teachers are protesting against school reforms and budget cuts being planned by Education Minister Laetizia Moratti. The stoppage was initially called to protest changes in the education system and a possible 2 percent cut in staff numbers. Education trade unions fear that up to 20,000 jobs face the axe, with some 14,000 of them among teaching staff.

Unions are also calling for an 8 percent pay increase. Enrico Panini, the leader of the education section of Italy's biggest union, the CGIL, said, "That hardly covers inflation. The government has proposed 3.5 percent, or less than projected inflation."

Finnish transport workers' industrial action spreads

Transport workers in Finland stepped up their industrial action this week, as the Confederation of Finnish Industry (EK) announced on November 17 that it was to suspend current negotiations on pay for the duration of the stoppage. The organisation said that the strike was illegal.

The strike initially began with industrial action by bus drivers in the Helsinki region. This later spread to five cities nationwide. On November 17, dock workers at the Port of Helsinki joined the industrial action. Following this, Transport Workers' Union (AKT) members began strike action against the ADR-Haanpää company by refusing to transport chemicals.

Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen called on both parties to end the strike and added that the government did not plan to intervene at this point. It is expected that the action of the port and transport workers will have a severe impact on Finland's main pulp and paper industries.

Staff at Manchester brewery continue strike action

Workers employed at the Boddingtons brewery in Manchester, England continued their campaign of strike action this week. The brewery is threatened with closure.

On November 16, employees held a second day of strike action following a two-day stoppage at the start of the month. Three days of industrial action are being held this week and four days next week.

The owners of the Boddingtons plant, Interbrew, are to close the

plant in the Strangeways district of Manchester, resulting in the loss of 55 jobs. Some production will move to Hydes Brewery, in the Moss Side area of the city, with the main production capacity moving to other sites in Lancashire, Scotland and Wales.

Middle East

Galilee firemen threaten strike

Firefighters from the Western Galilee Fire and Rescue Service demonstrated on November 14 over unpaid wages and threatened to shut down all local fire stations if they do not receive their salaries for October. The firefighters shut down fire stations in Nahariya, Karmiel, Ma'alot, Misgav and Shfaram. Local callouts were redirected to the firehouse in Acre.

The demonstration of the Western Galilee force—which was also joined by protesting pensioners—took place in front of the Acre municipality building, as a noisy display of fire engines, with sirens blaring. The Western Galilee firefighters union says the Acre municipality owes a total of NIS 700,000. Moshe Mosko, a spokesman for the fire and rescue commission in the Israeli Interior Ministry, said the ministry does not have the funds to offset the debts. "At this stage, we have no solutions and I can't promise that the workers will receive their salaries in the coming days," he said.

Israeli union body signals strike in banking sector

The Histadrut trade union federation in Israel is threatening to call a strike of the banking sector if the recommendations of the Bachar Committee—which suggested that the pension funds and the banks be separated—are implemented. Leon Morozovsky, head of the Histadrut's clerks union, said, "Whole bank branches are likely to close and many workers will be fired. The reform is harmful both to the consumer and to the workers."

Africa

Two thousand mineworkers on strike in South Africa

Two thousand South African mineworkers went on strike at East Rand Proprietary Mines (ERPM), in support of their demand for a higher wage increase than the 7 percent offered by management. The strike began on November 8 after talks organised by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) broke down.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) is demanding increases that would bring wages for underground workers to a minimum of R2200 [US\$364] a month and for surface workers to R2000 [US\$331]. They are also demanding a bonus of an additional month's pay per annum.

Oupa Komane wa Mokoena, the NUM regional secretary, said: “Currently underground workers are earning a lousy R1300 [US\$215] while surface workers earn only R1200 [US\$199]. Iija Graulich, spokesperson for Durban Roodepoort Deep, the largest shareholder in ERPM, has dismissed the wage demand as “absurd.”

Kenyan power workers strike to demand arrears

Employees of the Kenya Power and Lighting Company carried out a sit-down strike at company headquarters in Nairobi on November 11, in support of their demand for payment of salary arrears. Work was stopped at Power House and Mbaraki Yard in Mombasa, after 500 employees there organised a sit-down strike. Staff at other offices in Kisumu, Nairobi, Mombasa and Nakuru joined in the strike action.

The workers later resumed work after an agreement was reached between the union and management.

In Kisumu, the branch secretary of the Kenya Electrical and Allied Workers Union (Ketawu), Vincent Okulo, told the East African Standard (Nairobi) that the workers had been taken for a ride, with management refusing to implement an agreed 5 percent salary increase for the last two years. “We have been cheated for the last two years and we cannot take it any more.”

The paper reported that in Nakuru, more than 350 employees went on a go-slow to protest the delay in paying salary arrears and allowances. The workers there decided not to go back until they were paid their dues.

The Ketawu assistant branch secretary for Nakuru, Osinde Wamusamia, said that workers based in Molo, Eldama Ravine and Naivasha sub-branches had also downed tools. He said that the company had promised to pay the workers the 10 percent salary increase, but then went back on their word at the last moment.

Teachers strike in Uganda

More than 300 primary school teachers in Nyakitunda and Kabuyanda sub-county, Isingiro county, Mbarara district, in southwestern Uganda, have gone on strike demanding better pay.

In a letter addressed to Minister of Education Khiddu Makubuya on November 8, the teachers demanded that their monthly pay be raised to sh300,000 [US\$174]. Their current salary is sh113,000 [US\$65.5] per month.

The letter said, “We are withdrawing our labour and laying down our tools until the government considers our request.... We do a lot of donkey work yet we are the poorest paid in the country.”

District education officer Dan Tamwesigire claimed that his authority was trying to address the situation. Local councils have reported that the strike has paralysed school activities. According to New Vision (Kampala), district police commander, Patrick Otika Akubu claimed he had sent special branch investigators to study the situation and to ensure that it did not get out of hand.

Nigerian general strike suspended at the last moment

The all-out Nigerian general strike, due to begin on November 16, has been suspended by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). The strike was in support of a demand that the government fully rescind the 23 percent increase in the price of petrol, diesel and kerosene introduced in September. In order to avert the strike the government has cut energy costs by 10 percent.

On the eve of the planned national shut down, John Odah of the NLC told BBC News, “In the light of the fuel reduction we decided to suspend the strike.” He added that more negotiations were needed, as “incessant increases in fuel prices are a recurring problem.”

Less than a week ago the leadership of the unions—Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) and National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG)—had threatened to sanction any of the unions’ branches that acted to sabotage the strike. Banking and financial unions had also directed their members to obey the strike call “until government reverts the prices of fuel to the pre-September 23 levels.”

According to *This Day* (Lagos), maritime workers had been instructed to comply with the strike directives and “ignore any other contrary directives that may not emanate from Labour and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO), the arrow head of the anti-fuel strike.”

A court order was issued against the NLC on November 11 in an attempt to avert the strike.

However, three days later the president of PENGASSAN, Dr. Brown Ogbeifun, told *Sunday Vanguard* that the court order only affected NLC and not the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUC), to which PENGASSAN is affiliated, as well as LASCO, which is organising the strike, saying the court order therefore could not stop the proposed strike.

He said, “The strike will go on as planned unless government listens to the cries of Nigerians that the fuel prices be reverted to the old levels. We are an affiliate of TUC, not NLC, which the court has restrained. Again, NLC is not the body organising the strike. It is not even the TUC or CFTU (Congress of Free Trade Unions of Nigeria). The strike is called by LASCO. NLC is just a coalition member like the TUC, CFTU and others. TUC has not pulled out of LASC, which is spearheading the strike.”

On November 13 the Inspector General of Police (IGP), Tafa Balogun, called on the NLC to call off the strike, “because the police would not spare any persons or groups that threaten public peace”. He issued a statement pointing out that the police had noted that the “scale and magnitude of the proposed strike are quite frightening and disturbing,” adding that “the cumulative effect of these strikes is that it does not encourage adequate investment in the country.”



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