

Mass strikes by French public sector workers

Our correspondents
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More than five million public sector workers throughout France have held strike action and organized demonstrations this week in a movement that expresses growing anger at the policies of the Chirac government. Tens of thousands of teachers, hospital, postal, electricity and gas workers marched through Paris in defence of the public services, pay and jobs. One of their banners read: "For a quality public service, raise salaries."

Demonstrations also took place in French provincial towns. In Clermont-Ferrand more than 5,000 teachers, Bank of France employees, hospital staff and teachers marched through the streets.

Railway workers are protesting against plans to slash 3,590 jobs. If implemented the cuts would mean that since September 2000, 12,000 railway workers have been made redundant. This has resulted in more stressful working conditions for the remaining workers and a reduction in the quality of service. In 2004 there were 3,300 jobs cut, in addition to 1,300 in 2003. In October 2004, rail unions signed an agreement designed to prevent further industrial conflicts at the SNCF.

In the first days of the current strike only one in four intercity trains ran as scheduled, with an estimated 40 percent of workers participating. During the last national strike day in May 2004, 25 percent of the workers participated. On the morning of January 18, many scheduled railway services were hit by the strike, with only one of three TVG trains running. Only one of eight Thalys-trains was able to run and the Corail national rail service was totally suspended.

The France-Italy Artesia service was only running one of three trains and the France-Switzerland Lyria, three of five services. On January 19, SNCF, the French rail company said that two-thirds of high-speed TGV trains, 75 percent of intercity trains and 80 percent of Paris suburban services would be cancelled.

This followed three days of protest by 300,000 postal workers who are opposing privatisation. The government plans to introduce competition into deliveries and to close between 10,000 and 17,000 smaller post offices. This measure is expected to lead to thousands of job losses.

In Paris on the afternoon of January 18, a demonstration took place involving 700 people. At a rally outside Parliament, workers chanted slogans including, "Public service yes! Privatisation no!" Further demonstrations were held in Marseille, Nantes and Saint-Brieuc, Orléans, Rennes, Lille and Tours. The CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail), SUD, FO (Force Ouvrière) and CFTC (Conf. Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens), which represent 78 percent of postal employees, called the national strike on January 19. According to postal trade union estimates, about a quarter of their members participated.

Electricity and gas employees struck on January 19. They are opposing several thousand job losses in the power utilities. Trade unions estimate that from 2005 to 2007 some 12,000 to 15,000 jobs will be eliminated. The union Fédération des Mines et de l'Énergie of the CGT (FNME-CGT), representing the majority of workers, called the 24-hour strike. The FO trade union called a four hour strike of its members.

Strike participation varied at different branches of the power industries, ranging from 30 to 70 percent. At midday electricity production was reduced by about 10,000 megawatts due to the action, a 10 percent cut in national power output.

During the day, a demonstration was held at the Ministry of Industry and Finance attended by some 1,000 electricity and gas workers. A further 170 employees demonstrated in the city of Lyon.

Justice workers and officials held a demonstration on January 18 at midday near the National Assembly in Paris. On January 19, the Syndicat de la magistrature

trade union held a one-day strike of its members to protest the “anti relapse law” and the installation of proximity judges and the conditions at French prisons, claiming that they do not contribute to the rehabilitation of criminals.

Further strikes on January 19 involved surgeons at public hospitals who held strike action to demand better pay and conditions. Civil servants, psychiatrists and accident and emergency workers at public hospitals stopped work in various disputes to improve pay and job security.

Protests are set to escalate with a nationwide day of action called by the trade unions for February 5 to protest planned government changes to the 35-hour week law. The Chirac government is attempting to keep within public spending and borrowing limits that were laid down by the EU to create the conditions for the introduction of the Euro. As the Euro rises against the dollar and exports are hit it is becoming imperative for French big business that labour costs be cut even further. Chirac wants to extend the working week from its present 35 hours and introduce new “flexible working” laws that will make it easier to sack workers. Social welfare benefits, education and public sector jobs are all under threat.



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