

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

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Europe

Lecturers strike at six colleges in England over pay dispute

On March 1, lecturers at six colleges across England held a 24-hour strike to protest the non-implementation of an agreed pay deal. The staff, members of the lecturers' trade union Natfhe, struck at colleges in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Epping Forest, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Sheffield, Stanmore and Thurrock and Basildon.

Staff claim that college bosses have refused to implement a nationally agreed pay deal worth an average of 8 percent. The stoppage follows a strike by lectures at 37 colleges last week over the same issue.

New pay scales were agreed by trade unions in the college sector and the Association of Colleges (AoC) some 18 months ago. Colleges have cited "financial constraints" as the reason why the agreement has not been implemented.

Newcastle College principal and chief executive Jackie Fisher stated: "We have already implemented the 3 percent pay award increase on all salaries and although we have not been able to implement the AoC pay proposal in full we have accommodated most of its recommendations and done so within our financial constraints."

French train conductors protest contract changes

On March 2, members of the FGAAC (Fédération Générale Autonome des Agents de Conduite), the second main union of train conductors in France, held a national strike against the state railway company SNCF.

The action, the third since January, began at 20.00 hours local time and was set to continue until March 4, at 08.00 hours. It is directed against new measures governing staff promotion. The union intends to hold further strikes and to prolong them by 24 hours each time until their demands are fulfilled.

Finnish electricians strike

Some 230 electricians in Finland held industrial action on March 3 in a dispute over retaining their existing collective agreement. The workers are employed by Are Oy, which has unilaterally decided to impose a new agreement.

The Electrical Workers' Union says that the new agreement

is based on plans to cut the pay of the electricians and their compensation for certain expenses. A union spokesman said, "The question is, does an employer have the right, by changing its membership from one employer association to another, to choose a collective agreement that is more beneficial for the employer and weaker for the employees. If such practice would be allowed, it would significantly alter the whole collective bargaining system in Finland."

Hunger strike at Tavda factory in Russia

Last week several more workers at the Tavda microbiology factory in the Sverdlovsk region of Russia joined a hunger strike to protest the nonpayment of salaries and redundancy payments.

On February 24, the total number on hunger strike stood at 38 as two former workers joined the protest. The hunger strike began on February 21 and by the third day two of the workers had to receive emergency medical assistance due to its effects.

Some 600 employees at the plant are owed more than 8 million rubles following their dismissal last autumn, when the factory ceased production. Legal proceedings against the company's administration began on December 16, including charges of embezzlement and abuse of office.

During December, some 25 workers held an initial hunger strike, and were paid a portion of the monies owed to them.

Middle East

Israeli postal workers set to strike

Workers at the Israeli Postal Authority have declared an official industrial dispute—a legal prerequisite for starting industrial action, including a strike, after a two-week period.

The dispute involves an agreement to allow the private company Aviv Shigur to increase its mass-circulation delivery business so as to compete more effectively with the state-owned postal monopoly.

The postal workers also oppose a government decision that will increase greater public sector use of the Internet for transmitting certain notices to people. The postal workers said that although they did not object to this in principle, "as it means an improvement in public service, we will not approve [new] activities without reaching agreement on Postal Authority workers' rights first."

Yemeni University staff strike for higher pay

Teaching staff at state-run universities across Yemen have

gone on strike following a breakdown in talks with the government over pay and conditions.

According to Dr. Abdulrahman Ghanem, head of the Supreme Council of University Teaching Unions, the strike decision was taken after the government closed all the doors of dialogue and understanding. Ghanem accused the authorities of failing to keep a promise made last year to raise the salaries of its 5,250 teaching staff.

Teachers in the state sector say that poor working conditions are making it hard to retain staff, many of whom are attracted to opportunities abroad or to work in the private sector, which offers better pay. Many of those who do stay have to take second jobs in the private sector to make ends meet, which can have a detrimental effect on their performance and their scientific research, observers say.

The average income for ordinary civil servants is around \$80 per month, with university assistant professors receiving \$500.

Africa

South African truck drivers take strike action

On February 27, over 30,000 South African truck drivers struck in support of a demand for higher wages across the board and increased night shift allowances.

The strike is supported by the five main transport unions. It began after talks broke down between the unions and the Road Freight Employers' Association. Initially the unions had presented a list of 22 demands, including a wage increase of 9 percent across the board and 10 percent for workers earning the minimum wage. The current minimum weekly wage for general workers is R437 (\$US74) and for drivers is R500 (\$US84). This list was subsequently reduced to 16 demands, and the wage claim cut 8.5 percent across the board and 9 percent for minimum wage earners. Still the employers dismissed the demands as "unachievable" and "exceptionally high", offering 6 and 7 percent respectively.

On March 1, police used rubber bullets to attack a demonstration of hundreds of striking truckers in Johannesburg. The protest was held at Beyers Naude Gardens in the city centre, where strikers carried placards and chanted slogans demanding a 10 percent pay increase. Police declared the protest illegal and reported later that 29 people had been arrested and 15 people injured, of whom nine required hospital treatment.

Demonstrations took place on the same day in Vereeniging, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Pinetown, Newcastle, Port Shepstone, Bloemfontein, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London. On the following day, the centre of Johannesburg was brought to a halt as thousands of truckers marched to the National Bargaining Council office in Braamfontein.

The employers claim that the strike is costing them R12 million (\$US2.03 million) a day, and the South African economy R100 million (\$US17.12 million) a day. Analysts have warned that the country could face shortages of perishable products, food and fuel if the strike continues.

Nigerian defence workers continue strike action

On February 28, 16,000 civilian employees of the Nigerian Ministry of Defence confirmed their determination to continue their strike action over the non-payment of benefits due to them since last April.

The workers have been on strike since December 2004, demanding the payment of some N887million (\$US6.8 million) in arrears.

They are also protesting against the lack of promotion, non-release of payslips to workers, extortion from pensioners before they are allowed to collect their dues and the problem of casualisation. A spokesman for the strikers said that because of casualisation approximately 5,000 workers had served from five and seven years without having their employment regularized, when according to the law this should be done after only six months.

Copperbelt employees take strike action to demand boss's removal

Members of the National Energy Sector Workers Union (NESAWU) employed by ZESCO, on the Zambian Copperbelt, have taken strike action to demand the removal of managing director, Rodney Sisala.

NESAWU General Secretary Yotham Mutayachalo said, "The workers have been getting their salaries late for the past three to four months without any explanation from management." He added that the national union leadership had written to management drawing their attention to the workers' plight, but nothing had been done.

Monica Chisela, spokesperson for ZESCO, has dismissed the workers' demands for Sisala's removal as baseless and attributed the delay in paying the February 2005 salaries to the introduction of a new payment system embarked upon last November under the company's new Business Information System (BIS).

ZESCO management has suspended Kitwe branch chairman, Humphrey Zulu, for inciting workers to go on strike.



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