

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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## Europe

### French school pupils protest education reforms

On March 15, pupils demonstrated throughout France to protest a school reform bill put forward by Education Minister Francois Fillon. An estimated 50,000 students participated in the demonstrations. In Paris, 20,000 marched from the Republique Square to the Nation Square. In Toulouse, 4,500 demonstrated, 1,000 at Lille, 3,000 in Lyon and 2,000 in Bordeaux.

One of the government's proposed measures is the suppression in the lycées (high schools) of the popular *travaux personnels encadrés*—guided personal projects that combine different school subjects, free study and research. Fillon also wants to introduce a minimum core curriculum, from which artistic subjects would be excluded. Planned changes to the high school graduation diploma, the baccalaureate, have been suspended for the time being in response to widespread student opposition.

### Postal workers demonstrate in Marseille, France

On March 14, 1,000 postal workers demonstrated in the city of Marseille to demand further negotiations over the reorganisation and distribution of shipments and higher wages. A reported 35 of the 50 postal centres of distribution of the Bouches-du-Rhone region were blockaded. Some of the postal workers in the CGT and SUD trade unions have been involved in industrial action since March 1.

### German construction workers demonstrate against job losses

On March 14, 1,000 construction workers employed by Walter Bau in the southern German city of Augsburg demonstrated in opposition to planned job cuts. The rally was called by the IG Bau trade union.

In February, the company announced its insolvency. The new owners of the firm, Strabag, an Austrian concern, said that 3,000 of the company's 4,500 jobs would be eliminated in the Augsburg region, with 500 cut immediately. The company had been the third largest German construction firm, employing 9,200 workers worldwide and 6,000 in Germany.

### English college lecturers demand pay parity

Lecturers at Sheffield College struck for 48 hours on March 15. Staff are demanding pay parity with school and sixth form teachers. The action led to the cancellation of all classes at the college, but examinations were not affected. The employees won a 3 percent pay increase last August, but are still paid at a lower rate

than nationally approved pay scales.

Lecturers at Staffordshire College in England began a two-day strike on March 16. The staff there are also demanding pay parity with school teachers and have rejected several offers. Up to 170 lecturers, members of the Natfhe trade union, held strike action at the Newcastle-under-Lyme College.

Last year, the union agreed to a national two-stage pay increase. Lecturers at some colleges are still waiting for the second-stage wage increase and have held strike action in protest.

### Alitalia pilots continue dispute with Italian airline

Cabin crews at the Italian state airline Alitalia held a 24-hour strike on March 16 in a dispute over pay cuts and job losses. The stoppage resulted in the cancellation of 88 flights—including 54 domestic flights and 32 international flights from Rome and Milan.

The strike is the third such action since February. Members of the Sult union have rejected cuts in wages and job losses that were agreed to by other trade unions in the face of Alitalia's bankruptcy threats.

### Bulgaria Air makes redundancies following breakdown in pay talks

Management at Bulgaria Air announced last week that it would make redundant 15 of the national flag carrier's 58 pilots. The action follows the breakdown in negotiations over pay between the airline and the airline pilots' trade union.

The company announced the plan on March 8, adding that the number of operational aircraft would also be cut. Pilots had previously demanded a 67 percent increase in pay, and requested their salaries be brought into line with international pay rates. On February 25, pilots rejected a 12 percent wage increase and 33 percent increase of per-diem payments.

The union has maintained that it has no plans to hold industrial action in protest at the job losses and reiterated this position following the redundancy announcement.

In February, Paul McCarthy, vice president of the International Federation of Airline Pilots Associations, said that poor labour conditions and the low wages at most Bulgarian air carriers was compromising the safety of flights in the country.

### Opel auto workers strike in Portugal over pay and conditions

On March 10, autoworkers at the General Motors Opel plant in Azambuja, Portugal held a 24-hour strike in a dispute over pay. An estimated 97 percent of the 1,200 workers participated in the industrial action.

The stoppage follows the breakdown in negotiations between management and trade unions. The metal workers' union is calling

for a pay increase of about 5 percent (75 euros a month) of the average salary. The company is offering a 2 percent increase and is demanding increased worker productivity and more flexible working hours.

GM's resistance to the Portuguese workers' demands is bound up with the company's plan to restructure its European operations. GM plans to shed up to 12,000 jobs throughout the continent by the end of next year in order to lower annual costs by at least 500 million euros (348 million pounds). The company has not turned a profit in Europe since 1999.

### **Marshall Aerospace workers in England strike**

Fitters employed by Marshall Aerospace in Cambridge, England held strike action on March 15 in a dispute over pay parity and staff grades. The action was the first strike at the company in more than 20 years. It began after 96 percent of Amicus trade union members rejected a pay offer from the firm and voted for strike action.

The workers are pursuing a 50 pence per hour increase on their inclusive basic pay, to be backdated to July 31, 2004. Another grievance of the fitters is that the existing grading structure has resulted in the blockage of promotion routes and their pay gap with technicians has widened to £7,000 per annum.

### **Local authority workers set to strike in England to defend pension rights**

Local authority workers throughout Britain voted to hold a one-day strike last week. The strike, in which 1.5 million workers are expected to participate, is to be held on March 23. It is expected to be the biggest one-day public sector strike in Britain since the 1926 General Strike.

Workers are protesting proposals by the government to raise their retirement age from 60 to 65 and impose cuts in benefits and pensions. The changes to pension regulations, due to be introduced on April 1 will also result in workers having to pay higher contributions for vastly decreased benefits. On March 10, negotiations between five public sector trade unions and John Prescott, the deputy prime minister, failed to result in an agreement over the issue.

Some of the trade unions involved—Unison, the Transport and General Workers Union, Amicus, and Ucat—said that ballots of their members had resulted in votes in favour of industrial action by margins of between 73 and 87 percent. Among those balloted for strike action were 300,000 civil servants who work directly for the government, including lawyers, crown prosecutors and special advisors.

### **Middle East**

#### **Egyptian textile mill workers strike to oppose privatisation**

Around 400 workers at the Awadem branch of Esco's Qalyoub mill in Egypt have been on strike since February 13, opposing the government's decision to privatise the factory and sell it to industrialist Hashem El-Daghri.

Despite threats and cuts in their pay, the workers are refusing to give way. Mohamed Rashed, a textile worker at Esco for 33 years, told *Al Ahram Weekly*, "We've been on strike for a month now and the company is starting to up the ante. Last Sunday they cut three days from our pay to punish us for striking but we won't cave in because it is our survival that is at stake."

Another striker, Mohamed Awad Mahran, who has worked for the company for 23 years, told the paper, "Our strike is against privatisation and the government's market policies." The workers currently earn less than \$2 a day and further wage cuts have been proposed.

When the dispute began, the strikers contacted the government-controlled union, the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). However, according to *Al Ahram Weekly*, the union refused to give any assistance. Mahran told the paper, "The GFTU takes its orders directly from the authorities. They tow the official line and support privatisation. We reject this so-called union and what it stands for."

In July 2004, the GFTU collaborated with the government in drafting a new unified labour law, which permits the dismissal of workers without any justification. According to the new legislation, workers and the local union representatives have no right to strike unless the GFTU gives its permission, and even then, the duration of the strike must be specified beforehand. The textile workers strike is illegal because of these requirements.

### **Africa**

#### **Ugandan railway workers stage sit-down strike**

On March 15, 1,200 employees of the Ugandan Railway Corporation (URC) staged a national sit-down strike. The strikers were demanding the implementation of a consolidated salary agreement that was signed in 1992.

The railway workers are also concerned about their salaries and benefits, with a new concessionaire due to take over management of the URC at the end of the year. This move followed a recommendation from the government's Privatisation Unit.

According to *New Vision* (Kampala), a crisis meeting was held on March 15 between URC managing director, Daudi Murungi, union representatives, officials from the finance ministry and the Privatisation Unit. A statement from the corporation said the union and the management agreed that the workers resume work as they await the outcome of the negotiations.

#### **Coal miners demonstrate in Mozambique**

About 200 workers employed at the privately managed Chipanga II coal mine in Moatize, western Mozambique, downed tools on March 15 and marched seven kilometres to company headquarters to demand the payment of wages owed since January.

The workers demonstrated outside the offices and demanded a meeting with their employers. Union representatives complained of excessive working hours and inadequate safety procedures.



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