

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Europe

Emergency doctors in France on indefinite strike

An indefinite strike was launched on April 4 by the Association of the emergency hospital doctors of France (Amuhf).

The strike, which affects hospital emergency services, was called to demand greater resources. In Breton, where doctors launched an initial strike on March 17, 22 of the 24 emergency services have been closed. In an official statement, Amuhf said it required Health Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy “to open negotiations on the whole of the points of our claims.”

British TV workers’ dispute leads to strike

Hundreds of employees working across several UK television companies are expected to strike from April 8. At the end of March, workers at the ITV television company voted to reject a 3.3 percent pay offer and proceed with industrial action.

More than 700 production, technical and support staff are expected to join the strike, which begins with a 36-hour stoppage at LWT, Granada, Yorkshire TV and Manchester facilities operating 3sixtymedia. Colleagues of the latter will walk out from noon to 2 p.m. on the same day at Central TV’s two sites in Nottingham and Birmingham, Anglia TV’s base in Norwich and ITV’s southern control centre in London.

A further 12-hour stoppage will begin at Granada, Yorkshire, and 3sixtymedia on Sunday, April 10. This was added to the plan for industrial action after management tried to reschedule staff to work that day, in order to make up for shooting time lost in the earlier strike.

During the following week, a work to rule will be imposed in many companies, with further targeted walkouts at LWT, Granada, Yorkshire, and 3sixty media.

Anger over the management’s attitude to pay talks increased when ITV revealed annual profits of £340 million, due in part to its success in cutting jobs and increasing productivity.

Large bonuses to company executives—CEO Charles Allen received a reported £8.4 million package, and ITV’s finance director is thought to be earning more than a million pounds per year—further inflamed tensions.

UK rail guards to strike over hours

Rail guards on Merseyrail will walk out on April 8 and 9 after a long-running dispute over a 35-hour week.

The Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union represents about 170 guards on Merseyrail, which runs services throughout the North West. RMT guards claim that the changes to their working patterns could see them losing four “rest” days a year.

Scottish subway workers stage walkout

Workers on Glasgow’s subway staged a 24-hour strike on April 7 after pay talks broke down.

Negotiations between the Transport & General Workers Union and Strathclyde Passenger Transport ended without agreement on April 5. About 41,000 people use the Glasgow subway each day.

Irish construction workers stage protest over low pay

Workers at the Turkish construction firm Gama, in Tynagh, County Galway, in the Republic of Ireland, staged a five-hour demonstration on April 5 against low wage rates. They were also demanding detailed information about accounts that were opened in their names in a Dutch bank, alleged to contain as much as €30 million.

Gama Construction is currently under investigation by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment following claims of below-minimum-wage payments and wage fraud. Gama was last month accused in the Dáil of siphoning millions from workers’ wages.

Around 200 employees staged a march to Leinster House in Dublin on April 4. The workers are planning to target the company’s largest construction project, a Galway power station being built for the ESB in Tynagh.

Middle East

Work stoppage by Israeli electricity workers

Employees of Israel Electric Corp. (IEC) stopped work on refurbishing the country’s two largest power plants April 5 as part of their protest against changes in the electricity sector.

The work on the Rotenberg plant in Ashkelon and the Orot Rabin plant in Hadera was scheduled for completion by April 22 and April 26, respectively. Together, the two plants supply 9 percent of Israel’s electricity (360 megawatts in Hadera and 550 megawatts in Ashkelon).

The secretariat of the IEC employees’ union declared the work stoppage at the beginning of the week as part of its

dispute with the Israeli cabinet's decision to push ahead with privatisation and dissolution of most of the IEC by 2012. IEC sources said that if the work is not finished, it is possible there will be a severe electricity shortage during the summer. The workers are also delaying the unloading of coal ships at the company's wharves in Ashkelon and Hadera.

Strike expected at main Israeli bank

On April 5, the First International Bank of Israel workers' committee asked the Histadrut (General Federation of Labour in Israel) to declare an industrial dispute at the bank.

The reason for the strike is management's refusal to award employees a bonus, amounting to one month's salary, on First International Bank's profit results for 2004.

The bank's net profit rose 55 percent. The annual profit reflects a return on equity of 6.9 percent, but employees now claim that the real return is 7.4 percent, and that the difference is due to accounting methods for early retirement.

Africa

Pay strike by Kenyan tea factory workers

Workers at some of the tea factories in the Gucha and Kisii districts of Kenya have gone on strike to demand payment of wage arrears. The 400 workers at Kiagoi factory are demanding pay arrears amounting to Sh17 million (\$225,000), while workers at the Micii Mikuru factory are demanding Sh30 million (\$397,000), which has accumulated over the last four years.

The workers complain that the Kenya Tea Development Agency board had failed to honour a court ruling awarding workers 24 to 32 percent salary increments in January this year. Factory managers claimed that they were waiting for a directive from the minister of agriculture.

Protests continue in Niger opposing food price increases

A protest movement in Niger has called several strikes and demonstrations over the last three weeks, in opposition to a new tax on essential goods. The protests brought activity in the capital, Niamey, to a standstill on March 22 and again on March 31. However, the movement's leaders have called off an expected 24-hour nationwide general strike at the last minute.

The movement is known as the Coalition Against Costly Living (CACL). It was created by 30 groups opposed to the introduction of a new 19 percent value added tax (VAT) on basic goods and services, such as flour, milk, sugar, water and electricity.

CACL began its protests on March 15, when tens of thousands of people marched through the streets of Niamey in one of the biggest demonstrations held in the capital in recent times.

According to an IRIN report, five of the movement's leaders are currently under arrest, charged with plotting against the state. They could face up to 20 years in jail if found guilty. The five leaders were detained at the end of March, after urging Muslim and Christian leaders to hold prayers to save Niger from misery. A government spokesman claimed the appeal was

"a veiled call to rebellion."

Saouna Inoussa, a CACL spokesman, said the general strike had been suspended "to create an atmosphere of détente." Instead of the general strike, Inoussa said that a march would be held in the capital Niamey on Saturday, April 9. "We are ready to enter negotiations, but on condition that our unjustly imprisoned leaders are freed," he told reporters.

The government has now released 40 other protestors who were arrested on April 4 in Maradi, a town 600 km to the east of Niamey. It is not yet known whether another 25 to 30 protestors—who were arrested during a stay-at-home strike the previous week in the provincial towns of Zinder and Tahoua—are still being held.

Niger is ranked as the world's second-poorest country by the United Nations, with 60 percent of its 11 million population living on less than a dollar a day. Last month, the World Food Programme (WFP) appealed for US\$3 million in aid to help feed 400,000 people in Niger, after devastation of crops by locusts worsened the difficulties caused by drought last year.

Ugandan teachers strike to demand payment of pay rise

More than 200 primary school teachers in Kabula County, Uganda, went on a sit-down strike March 31 to demand payment of a delayed salary increase.

"The government announced salary increments for teachers in July 2004," the strikers told the *Monitor*, a Ugandan newspaper based in Kampala. "Our colleagues in other districts have already received the increments, and nothing is coming our way. We want our salaries." They camped outside the office of the deputy resident district commissioner, Lt. George Kagulire, demanding that he speak to them.

The strikers explained that the council in the Kabula district had delayed increasing their salaries as had been set out in the 2004-2005 national budget. They threatened not to set the exams due at the end of term, unless their salary arrears are paid.



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