

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

22 July 2005

Europe

Public sector workers in Portugal strike to oppose spending cuts

Public sector workers in Portugal participated in a 24-hour national strike on July 15. They were protesting plans by the new government of Prime Minister Jose Socrates to cut public spending to bring it into line with European Union rules by 2008. The government is also proposing an increase in the value-added tax to 21 percent from 19 percent.

An estimated 500,000 workers took part in the action, called by the "Common Front" federation, comprising a number of public worker unions. Hospitals, health centres, ports, public transport and other public sector facilities and offices were affected.

Public transport drivers stage nationwide industrial action in Italy

On June 15, public transport drivers took nationwide strike action in Italy. The 24-hour stoppage was held to protest cuts in sick-pay benefits. The action was called by the three main trade unions and resulted in widespread traffic queues and gridlock in city centres, including that of the capital, Rome. According to the trade unions, up to 90 percent of public transport workers participated in the industrial action.

In Rome, metro and bus services came to a halt at 7:30 a.m. local time. Due to the action, local authorities in the city temporarily suspended traffic restrictions.

Describing the issues involved in the dispute, Walter Baricevich, secretary of the transport branch of the country's second-biggest union, the CISL, said, "If an employee is sick for a whole month, his pay slip will drop by between 40 and 50 percent and he'll find himself below the poverty threshold."

AirItalia staff strike over pay, conditions and contract terms

Cabin staff employed by AirItalia at the Fiumicino airport in Rome took 24-hour industrial action on June 18 in a dispute over safety, security, pay, low recruitment and other contract issues. The employees are members of the United Transport Workers Union.

Staff are also concerned over the use of flexible fixed-term contract labour, which, according to the union, is being implemented "to the limit of psychological and physical

stress." The strike resulted in the cancellation of 59 flights (26 national and 33 international) from Rome and Milan airport.

Ferry staff at company in England protest planned job losses

On July 13, workers employed by the ferry company P&O demonstrated at Portsmouth Ferry Port in England to protest the company's decision to close its route to Le Havre in France on September 30. It is expected that the termination of the route by P&O will lead to 350 job losses. The workers affected are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union. The union is calling for consultation on the decision and for another shipping company to take over the route.

The termination of the Le Havre route is just one of four closures P&O has announced out of the 13 routes it currently operates. In January, the company closed its route from Portsmouth to Cherbourg in northwest France.

London cleaners strike Houses of Parliament

Cleaners at the Houses of Parliament in London set up picket lines outside the building on July 20. Up to 170 cleaners protested at six entrances to the Houses of Parliament to demand parity with other cleaners, including better pay and benefits.

The 24-hour stoppage was the first to be held following months of campaigning by the workers. It was timed to be held 24 hours before Parliament breaks for its annual summer recess.

The cleaners, who are employed by two contracting firms, earn just £5 an hour, with no entitlement to sick pay or a pension scheme. They receive only 12 days holiday a year.

One of the striking cleaners interviewed by the *Guardian* newspaper said he had two cleaning jobs at the Houses of Parliament in order to earn a decent wage. He worked a 64-hour week, cleaning kitchens during the night and then cleared rubbish during the day. He said, "We are working in the most privileged house in the world. We want to do a great job, but the money does not reflect our work."

Other cleaners who are employed by parliamentary authorities receive £8 an hour, six weeks holiday, sick pay and a pension. The UK statutory minimum wage is currently £4.85 an hour.

Swiss airport taxi drivers end action

On July 20, taxi drivers at Switzerland's main airport in Zurich ended their five-day industrial action.

The dispute dates back to January 1, when the employer, IG Airport Taxi, introduced a new contract with the airport operator, resulting in an increase in the annual fee charged by the airport for each taxi working there from SFr 5,000 to SFr 10,000. But this week, the Unia trade union involved announced it had accepted the employer's offer to negotiate a new collective labour contract, and agreed to a temporary compromise that includes increased pay and better sick pay benefits.

As part of the new agreement, Unia, which represents transport workers, surrendered its original demands for a SFr 4,000 (\$3,088) minimum monthly wage guarantee for drivers. Unia claimed that the agreement represented a victory for the taxi drivers, who stood to gain an average 8 percent salary increase.

Africa

Zambian miners on strike

Zambian copper production has been crippled by strike action in some of the country's most important copper mines.

On July 12, workers at the Nkana copper-smelting plant in Kitwe—owned by Konkola Copper Mine (KCM)—took strike action to back their demand for a 100 percent pay increase. The strike rapidly spread to three large copper mines, involving around 500 miners at the KCM Nchanga mine in Chingola, another 300 workers at the KCM mine in Chililabombwe, and miners at the majority Chinese-owned Chambishi mine.

KCM is 79 percent owned by UK-listed Vendetta Resources Ltd. A spokesperson for the company said that strike had cost it approximately US\$ 2 million a day in export earnings during the first seven days. The action at Nkana alone was expected to reduce copper production by 600 metric tonnes per day. The affected mines are together responsible for most of the country's copper production.

On the night of July 15, the police arrested 31 people after a demonstration in Chililabombe. The police told Reuters that they were "hunting for more." The Miners Union of Zambia (MUZ) insists that none of those arrested were miners.

After negotiating a 30 percent wage rise—an increase from the employers' original offer of 15 percent—MUZ has appealed to the strikers to return to work. However, the miners have rejected the offer and say they will continue the strike until they achieve their full demand.

Reuters reported that the strikes are likely to damage Zambia's target of 500,000 tonnes copper production this year.

Doctors take action in Ibadan, Nigeria

Resident doctors at the University College Hospital (UCH), Ibadan, in northern Nigeria, began an indefinite strike on July 15, in pursuance of improvements in working conditions.

The Nigerian *Vanguard* newspaper reported that the doctors complain of being overworked and understaffed. Fifty resident doctors, who have moved on after completing their training in the last year, have not been replaced. Other issues behind the strike are the lack of security for already substandard doctors' accommodation, a lack of equipment on the wards, inadequate support services, and non-payment of agreed allowances for resident staff.

A spokesperson for the doctors said that staff shortage in some specialities was so chronic that doctors are placed on call every day. He said, "We must realise that doctors are human beings and someone deprived of sleep day in day and out is only a time bomb for a disastrous medical error. As much as we aim to optimise our training, we hold it as sacred trust to protect the patient from preventable harm."

According to *Vanguard*, the response from the chief medical director of UCH, Professor Ilesanmi, was to cynically argue that "as people under training, the more experience they gather, the better for them."

South African shop workers strike over recruitment

Last week, an unofficial strike took place in at least six shops in the "Pick 'n Pay" chain in Western Cape, South Africa. The workers were reported to be dissatisfied with the recruitment process, which is controlled only by the management.

A spokesperson for Pick 'n Pay claimed that the protest was illegal and insisted that the recruitment process was "solely a management task." The South African Commercial Catering Allied Workers Union (Saccawu) organised a return to work pending a meeting with management on July 21, to be held under the auspices of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA).



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