

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

14 October 2005

Europe

Belgium workers hold general strike

Workers in Belgium held a general strike on October 7, the first in the country since 1993. The strike was called by the FGTB/ABVV union to protest government plans to raise the retirement age from 58 years to 60 years.

The FGTB/ABVV is Belgium's second largest trade union and it has calculated that the plans will result in 25 percent of men and 22 percent of women losing the right to take early retirement at age 58 after 35 years of employment history from 2008, when the changes will take effect. In 2012, when the employment history prerequisite will be lifted to 38 years, ABVV said the change will affect 49 percent of men and 53 percent of women.

The strike brought much of the country to a standstill, with transport, schools and government services hit. It resulted in the cancellation of trains, including the Eurostar service from London and the Thalys connection from Paris to Brussels. Workers in many factories and employees at the country's ports struck, including Antwerp, one of Europe's largest. Staff at the Ford car plant in Genk, east Belgium also participated. At Brussels international airport there were flight delays due to baggage handlers supporting the strike.

National pay protest in Russia

On October 13 an estimated one million teachers, doctors and other state employees participated in nationwide protests in Russia. The workers are demanding higher salaries. Various trade unions were involved.

Some 2,500 protesters demonstrated behind metal barricades near the White House in Moscow, whilst hundreds of armed police officers with dogs looked on.

One of the workers who attended the Moscow demonstration told the media that she earned just 1,600 roubles (\$56) per month: "I would like someone from the government to stay in our hospital for just one day

to see how people are treated. But they usually stay in private clinics and don't see what we see every day."

Many teachers attended the protests, behind banners proclaiming, "Destroy education and you'll lose the future" and "No change to the legal status of educational institutes."

More than 9,000 teachers from 288 schools protested in the Volgograd region. Thousands of teachers demonstrated in the central square at the Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk's and demanded the resignation of Education and Science Minister Andrei Fursenko.

Delegations of students also participated in the demonstrations and called for their stipend to be increased to the level of the minimum wage, which stands at just 800 roubles per month.

Demonstrations and protests of several thousand workers and students were held in other towns and cities, including Vladivostok and Khabarovsk. Those attending held banners calling for a "decent life," "a decent wage" and more respect for their work.

The government announced that wages of public sector workers are to be increased by 8 percent on March 1, by an additional 4.5 percent on May 1 and by a further 6.5 percent on September 1. These increases will make hardly any difference because of the low levels of basic income. In Russia, the average monthly wage for a young teacher is just over \$50. A senior teacher receives about \$110. Young doctors get about \$70, while senior doctors receive \$175.

French Eurotunnel maintenance workers strike

French maintenance workers on the Channel Tunnel took strike action on October 11 resulting in the cancellation of one in four trains. According to Eurotunnel, 100 workers walked off the job in the morning in a dispute over management plans to restructure the firm. The workers returned to work in the afternoon and normal services were resumed.

The strike follows a June agreement between Eurotunnel and trade unions to implement a cost-

cutting programme. Under the agreement Eurotunnel is to shed 750 jobs from its 3,200-strong workforce through attrition and voluntary departures.

Eurotunnel is \$11.3 billion in debt and opened talks with the trade unions following the strike in an attempt to resolve the dispute.

Train drivers in Stockholm, Sweden strike

Train drivers employed on Stockholm's underground system took unofficial strike action on October 6. The strike paralysed the underground system as all lines were affected by cancellations. Around 6:30 a.m. only 18 out of 55 trains were in operation. During the stoppage many trains were prevented from leaving the depots in Högdalen in the south of the city and Vällingby in the northwest.

The drivers struck in support of Per Johansson, the chairman of the Connex chapter of the Swedish Union of Service and Communication Employees, who was fired by the Connex transport company last week. The workers state that the union representative was dismissed for criticising Connex's safety work.

Africa

Retail workers on strike in South Africa

Workers at Clicks pharmacy and cosmetics stores in South Africa have embarked on an indefinite strike, after negotiations over a pay increase stalled for five months. The strike began at the end of last week.

Clicks management has offered R225 (US\$34.50) extra per month, which is an 8.8 percent increase. The workers' union, South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), is calling for an increase of R300 (US\$46), or 10 percent.

The union has admitted that most Clicks stores are still open, since management have hired contractors to fill the places of those on strike.

Strike rules agreed between SACCAWU and management through the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration restrict the strikers' ability to make their action effective. Even so, some Clicks stores had to close for short periods.

Other shops owned by the same parent company, New Clicks—such as The Body Shop, Discom and Musica—are not affected by the strike, nor are the professional pharmacy staff in Clicks stores.

Victims of privatisation demonstrate in Nigeria

Around 2,000 people protested outside a Nigerian steel plant in the southwestern Delta state, which had

been bought in February 2005 by Ispat Industries of India.

The demonstrators were demanding payment of unpaid wages and benefits from the period before the plant was privatised. They carried placards making clear their anger that promises to pay their entitlements had been broken. Around a hundred police and troops were kept close by the demonstration.

Mauritian union leader victimised for sending an email

The president of the Mauritian Airline Pilots' Professional Association (MALPA), Russlan Ramdowar, has been effectively suspended for writing a private email in his capacity as a union leader.

For several years, pilots based in Mauritius have complained of the undermining of their rights, working conditions and payments while training, as well as the lack of a policy on promotion.

Their anger exploded when a new method of calculating flying hours was introduced, allowing management to increase flying schedules to the extent of exceeding international norms and putting flight crews and passengers at risk. Fifty-five pilots have been fired since November 2004 for opposing the measures.

Ramdowar sent the email to the International Federation of Airline Pilots' Association (IFALPA) to ask whether the new method of calculating flying hours was legal. On August 31, the airline informed Ramdowar that he had been immediately "de-rostered" for sending the email. Ramdowar has countered that the email was intercepted illegally and in violation of his rights as a trade union leader. The case has been taken up by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).



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