

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

25 November 2005

Europe

Italian unions on four-hour general strike

Italy's main unions were taking four-hour general strike action today, Friday November 25, to protest the government 2006 budget. Demonstrations are planned across the country, with public and private sector workers due to participate in the action between 12 noon and 1600 hours. Hundreds of flights to and from Italy have been cancelled, including 230 operated by Italy's Alitalia.

The unions complain that the 2006 budget "damages employees and pensioners without boosting development" and fails to "promote confidence among households and operators." The budget proposes billions of spending cuts targeting social security and pensions.

French railworkers strike to end

During the evening of November 21, rail workers in France began an indefinite nationwide strike to protest at any government plans to privatise the SNCF rail network. The action was called by four train unions with members in the industry—the Confederation Generale du Travail, Sud-Rail, Force Ouvriere and Fgaac.

Up to 80 percent of France's 170,000 railworkers participated in the action, which was against government plans to dismantle a third of the railway sidings in train stations and the modernization of 11,000 kilometers of railways to cut costs. It is feared that the reorganisation of the rail network will lead to additional job cuts being made this year and that parts of SNCF will be spun off, outsourced or sold.

The stoppage began at 8 pm local time and affected up to two thirds of scheduled train services and had a severe impact on travellers commuting from work on Monday evening.

The strike continued throughout Wednesday, but with fewer services affected. Most international trains, including Eurostar service to London and Thalys trains to Brussels, operated as normal.

As soon as strike action began, the trade unions began negotiations to end the dispute. It is expected that the unions and SNCF will agree on a deal shortly to end the dispute. On November 22, President Jacques Chirac gave his support for a negotiated settlement and also promised that SNCF would not be privatized—giving the green light for unions to call off the dispute.

French journalists strike

Journalists at France's *Liberation* newspaper have voted to renew a strike against job cuts at the newspaper for a third day. The newspaper, founded in 1974 by Serge July and Jean-Paul Sartre, is to sack 52 employees, including 28 in editorial departments.

It is estimated to be losing more than 500,000 euros a month and has lost 10 percent of its circulation in the 12 months. Edouard de Rothschild now owns a majority 38.9 percent stake in the newspaper, after it was forced to accept a 20 million euros cash injection earlier this year.

Though *Liberation* has made previous job cuts, these were agreed as "voluntary" redundancies.

Russian workers strike Ford

Ford Motor company workers at its Vsevolozhsk plant in the Russian region of Leningrad began a work to rule on November 22. Workers will adhere to all instructions and regulations and will not work overtime.

The action has been called as part of an ongoing pay dispute. During the strike the number of cars manufactured was cut from the normal 180 per day to 150. A conference is to be held this week on whether to hold an all-out strike.

Bulgarian teachers continue protests at government building

On November 22, members of the Trade Union of Bulgarian Teachers continued their protest outside the government building and the President's Office in Sofia to demand more funding for education.

The protest numbered between 150-200 people. The participants held up a black cross with the sign "2006 Budget and Secondary Education". Other protesters carried placards reading: "State, Which doesn't Appreciate Teachers, Dooms Its Children", "Carelessness is Contagious; and, "No" to Alms".

The union and Minister of Education Daniel Valchev are continuing negotiations regarding the dispute, but were unable to reach an agreement. Valchev said that the government could only find additional money for education if teachers were laid off.

Middle East

Iranian workers protest outside Parliament

A group of Iranian workers staged a rally outside the Majlis

(Parliament building) on November 20 to protest against employment laws covering temporary contracts. Hadi Rezazadeh explained, “The temporary contract law has been enacted to authorize dismissal of workers with 28 year long record of service.”

MPs later told the Majlis session that some 50 lawmakers had signed a petition to improve the provisions of temporary labor contracts that will be submitted to the Social Commission soon.

West Galilee firefighters strike over wages

Firefighters across the Western Galilee closed their stations on November 20 and announced a general strike over management’s failure to pay them last month’s wages and accompanying benefits for the past two and a half years. Only firefighters in Nahariya responded in case of emergencies during the stoppage.

The head of local firefighters’ union, Victor Nahmias said they would hold meetings with representatives of the Histadrut labor federation to discuss further steps. He said that the firefighters have not been receiving their salaries on a regular basis as the 40 local authorities are in debt to the sum of NIS 5 million and have failed to transfer the necessary money to fund the fire service. Most of the municipalities in debt are from the Arab sector.

Several months ago, Deputy Interior Minister Ruhama Avraham visited the area to meet with the firefighters, who raised their demand to take the union’s budget from funds the Interior Ministry transferred to local councils to reduce debts. Avraham said such a step would take time to implement since it required changing the law.

The firefighters are due to march to the Knesset this week to meet with lawyers.

Africa

South African court bans picket and march

More than 320 cleaning, security and maintenance workers at the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront in Cape Town, South Africa, are on strike in a bitter dispute which began over wages. Their employers are now offering 8.4 percent for a period of 18 months, whereas the union is demanding 8.65 percent. The original union demand was for an increase of 9 percent for all employees.

The employers have accused the workers of assaulting temporary workers and damaging property, and gained a court interdict against the strikers. Even a march planned by the strikers has been banned on the grounds that it would breach the terms of the court interdict.

The employers’ actions have had the effect of hardening the strikers’ resolve. Their shop steward, Vincent Erasmus, told the *Cape Times*, “We will continue with our action. Even if we strike until next year. We don’t care anymore.”

On November 18, over 100 strikers had marched along the streets with their banners, shouting slogans and singing songs.

Tanzanian doctors continue their strike

Junior doctors and auxiliary health staff at Muhimbili

National Hospital in Tanzania have decided to reject an improved pay offer from the government and to continue their strike. The strike began on November 16 and is expected to continue into a second week.

The doctors are demanding 600,000 shillings (\$US511) per month basic salary for junior doctors and 1.2 million shillings (\$US1021) for specialised doctors. They said the offer was below the 600,000 shillings a month recommended to the government in June by the Medical Association of Tanzania (MAT).

One of the striking doctors, Dr Hamis Kingwangala, said the consultant advising MAT had recommended a monthly basic salary of 1.2 million shillings for senior doctors because of the hazardous work they have to perform. “We are dealing with lives of people; doctors are exposed to dangerous diseases,” Dr Kingwangala told the Tanzania-based *Guardian*. The doctors have accused the government of excessive spending on election campaigns, while ignoring areas of higher priority.

Nurses and auxiliary staff joined the strike this week. Police have banned a march by health workers to the State House where they planned to present their grievances to President Benjamin Mkapa.

Ugandan bank workers in nationwide strike

Staff at the Bank of Baroda in Uganda launched a nationwide strike on November 18 that affected all the bank’s branches. The bank employees are demanding a salary increase of 10 percent, and have rejected their employers’ offer of six percent. The strikers are demanding the payment of salary arrears, which have been building up for some time. This is the third strike at the hospital in a year.

Mauritanian oil workers strike

Striking Mauritanian oil workers demonstrated in the capital Nouakchott November 17. The workers are demanding the reinstatement of sacked colleagues and more secure contracts.

They claim that the company they work for, MKT, which is a subcontractor for the Australian company Woodside, has been guilty of “agitation and deliberate violations of national as well as international working regulations”.



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