

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

4 November 2005

Europe

Belgian public sector workers hold second nationwide strike

Belgian public sector workers held a second 24-hour national strike on October 28 to protest government plans to increase the retirement age from 58 to 60. Tens of thousands demonstrated in the capital Brussels.

The first strike was held on October 7 and brought much of the country to a standstill. The action on October 28 affected transport, education and government services in most towns and cities. Charleroi airport, south of Brussels, was also shut down. Train services were not affected as the trade unions agreed to keep them open so that protesters could get to and from the capital.

The government of Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt has rejected demands to reopen talks with the trade unions on the proposed changes to the pension system.

Shell oil workers in the Netherlands strike in pensions dispute

On October 31, Dutch workers employed by the oil company Shell began their first strike since 1979. The employees are protesting plans by Shell to raise the retirement age to 65 from 60 and force workers to contribute to their pensions.

The strike began when Shell allowed a deadline to pass set by the trade union to reach an agreement over the issue of pension reform. The Dutch government said that it did not plan to intervene and that it was up to the two parties to resolve the dispute.

Coal miners begin nationwide strike in Spain

Miners in Spain began a 48-hour national strike on November 3. The previous day negotiations between the government and the CCOO and the UGT trade unions ended without agreement.

The stoppage is expected to involve more than 8,000 miners nationwide and has been called to protest

government plans to reform the coal industry, including the imposition of an early retirement age of 45 on miners. The trade unions favour an early retirement scheme and have proposed that miners retire at 52 years of age.

In the Asturias region, which is the biggest mining area in Spain, all the pits were closed with some roads being blocked by striking miners. Miners in Galicia, Aragon, Andalusia, Castilla-La Mancha and Catalonia and Asturias are involved in the stoppage.

Ford workers at Russian plant stage warning strike

Staff employed at Ford Motor's Russian plant in Vsevolozhsk outside St. Petersburg staged a warning strike November 2 to demand a 30 percent increase in wages and the introduction of an extra month's salary at the end of each year.

The workers have threatened to hold a sit-in at the plant next week if the dispute is not resolved.

Hospital workers in Newcastle demand pay parity

On October 31, 600 hospital workers staged a 24-hour strike action at four hospitals in Newcastle, northeast England. The dispute started two days earlier when staff began an overtime ban to demand a pay increase. Strikes were held at the Newcastle's Royal Victoria Infirmary, General, Freeman and Walkergate hospitals.

The Unison public sector trade union says that some long-serving workers are being paid less than new recruits under the government's new pay system, Agenda for Change.

Middle East

Lock-out of Iranian shipyard workers

One thousand six hundred shipyard workers in the southern port city of Bandar Abbas were locked out after a strike on October 29. The employees of Iran Shipbuilding & Offshore Industries Complex Co.

(ISOICO) were protesting against expulsions, unpaid benefits, lack of job grading and management behaviour. They had staged a sit-in, switching off the machines. The next day, they found the entrances locked.

The workers have vowed to continue their action by assembling outside the shipyard.

Stranded Indian workers stage sit-in at embassy in Kuwait

Forty-five stranded Indian workers employed at a company in Kuwait City staged a sit-in at the Indian Embassy on November 1, demanding it take immediate measures to repatriate them.

One worker explained, “The company got some Arabic documents signed from us a few months ago. Initially we were sceptical to sign the documents, but when the management assured us that the papers were pertaining to our contracts we agreed to sign them. But now it has come to light that these documents indicate that each worker owes the company KD 500.”

The company has given the workers 15 days to leave the country, after which they will have to pay the fine.

The workers originate from the Indian states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh and have signed up as technicians, carpenters and helpers. Thus far the Indian Embassy has repatriated over 300 workers from the company after they staged sit-ins protesting poor living conditions and payment defaults. More than 60 workers at the company were arrested and deported by police in separate incidents two months ago.

Africa

South African hotel workers strike

Hotel workers at the Protea Hotel Wilderness Resort in Wilderness, South Africa went on strike at 6 a.m. on November 1 to protest against poor pay and conditions.

According to an article in the *Herald Online*, the strikers are demanding an increase of R180 (US\$27) a month, together with a minimum wage of R2100 (US\$315). The hotel management is offering a R155 (US\$23) increase and a minimum wage of R1955 (US\$293).

The strikers gathered outside the hotel and “toy-toyed”—marching, singing and chanting—using trumpets and sirens as well as their voices.

Kenyan university staff threatened with dismissal after strike

Around 700 lecturers employed at the University of Kenyatta have been threatened with dismissal unless they sign forms to indicate their readiness to resume work when the university reopens, according to an article in the Nairobi-based *Nation* newspaper.

Nearly 600 lecturers were said to have signed the forms before the deadline at midday on November 2, but another 100 had not done so.

The university was forced to close in mid-October when the lecturers went on strike to pressure the administration to pay them 35 percent of the money raised from running parallel degree programmes. The lecturers ended their strike after the government asked the university to find an alternative means of meeting the lecturers’ demands. The university has since claimed that it is unable to comply with the government request.



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