

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

2 December 2005

Europe

Italian public sector workers strike

On November 25, millions of public workers throughout Italy staged a national strike and held demonstrations to protest budget cuts by the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

A coalition of three trade unions—the CGIL, the CISL and the UIL—was involved, representing around 12 million workers. The unions said that between 80 and 90 percent of workers supported the general strike, the sixth since Berlusconi came to power in 2001.

Many public services including banks, post offices, government offices and refuse collection were affected. Public transport was halted for four hours, and air traffic was severely hit, with more than 230 flights cancelled. Many hospitals operated with emergency services only. Many other workers stayed away from their place of work either to express solidarity at demonstrations or because it was too difficult to get to work. Public transport workers in Milan held a transport strike.

Thousands of people attended rallies in squares across Italy, including Rome's Piazza Navona. Opera house orchestras protested cuts in the arts budget by staging concerts of requiems by Mozart, Verdi and Brahms.

Berlusconi denounced the strike as "absolutely useless, a tired old ritual that will have no impact whatsoever." The government plans to introduce a new draft budget that includes more than €16 billion euros in spending cuts. Some of the most far-reaching cuts involve transfers to regional government of about €3 billion.

The cuts are being made to ensure that the current budget deficit meets commitments made to the European Union. The European Commission recently forecast that the deficit would end this year at 4.3 percent of GDP and fall to 4.2 percent in 2006. The Italian government agreed that it would bring the deficit down to 3.8 percent in 2006 in an attempt to

meet the Stability and Growth Pact's 3 percent ceiling by 2008.

The unions are not opposing the plans to cut the budget in principle, but merely argue that present funds are being distributed incorrectly and that cuts are being made in all the wrong places.

Oil workers in Azerbaijan strike to demand wage increase

Workers at US oil services firm McDermott staged a strike over wages at the company's Azerbaijan operation on November 28. Hundreds of workers on the night shift protested at an oil rig construction facility in Primorsk, 20 kilometres south of the capital Baku.

The action follows a 24-hour strike by McDermott staff the previous week, involving about a third of the company's 3,000 staff. It was the first organised campaign against one of the glut of Western oil firms operating in the republic. The oil workers are demanding pay increases of up to 30 percent and pay parity with foreign staff employed by the firm.

The company responded by issuing a statement saying that from early December it would implement longer working hours and claimed that this would equate to a 22 percent pay increase. McDermott worker Ramin Shyhkaibov told AFP news, "We didn't ask for more hours—we asked for a wage increase of at least 20 percent." The employee said that he earned just US\$1.72 (€1.4) per hour.

Samsung workers in Germany strike to oppose plant closure

On November 28, workers employed at Samsung's manufacturing facility in Berlin struck to protest plans by the electronics company to close the plant by the end of this year. The company announced the closure in September and has yet to agree to a compensation deal with staff.

The plant closure threatens the loss of 750 out of 800 jobs. Next week, the workforce is to hold a joint demonstration with employees from JVC's camcorder

manufacturing facility in Berlin, which is also due to close.

British gas engineers vote to strike in pension dispute

On November 29, British gas engineers voted to hold five 24-hour strikes in the run-up to Christmas and after the New Year. The GMB members are in dispute with British Gas's parent firm Centrica over plans to close the final salary pension to new staff from January. The 6,000 engineers repair and service domestic boilers. Strikes will take place on December 12, 19 and 21, and January 6 and 9. Staff will also not handle out-of-hours calls from December 12 to 23 and January 4 to 10.

Africa

Military doctors take over jobs of sacked strikers in Tanzania

Fifty-two doctors, on strike at the Muhimbili National Hospital in Tanzania since November 16, have been sacked and replaced by 40 military doctors and 35 doctors from the Ministry of Health. Some of the military doctors have already begun working, while others are on "familiarisation." Brigadier-General Yandon Kohi said military doctors had been sent to wards including maternity, surgery, medicine and ear, nose and throat.

The Muhimbili doctors began their strike to demand higher salaries and better working conditions. Nursing staff and more than 100 interns at the hospital supported the action.

According to *IRIN*, the nurses returned to work after the government issued an ultimatum on November 22. The striking doctors were sacked on the following day, after they refused to accept a pay offer below the figure recommended to the government by the Medical Association of Tanzania in June. There was a weeklong strike in the hospital six months ago over the same issue. A decision to sack the striking interns at that time was rescinded by the government.

Nigerian port workers to strike against privatisation

Members of the Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria (MWUN) were due to begin an indefinite strike on December 1 to protest against privatisation and the loss of thousands of jobs. The strike will bring all the country's major seaports to a standstill.

The MWUN is limiting widespread opposition to privatisation to the issue of severance pay. The union

originally demanded N2 million [US\$15,540] each for more than 6,000 registered dockworkers whose jobs are expected to go. The union leadership has already reduced the original claim to N586,000 [US\$4,550] per dock worker.

According to Anthony Nted, president of the MWUN, a government task force has recommended a sum of less than N50,000 [US\$388] for each docker, some of whom have worked in the industry for over 30 years. The government has declared the strike illegal.

Health workers' strike in Nigeria called off

The strike of health workers in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Nigeria was called off on November 29 after the intervention of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). This was the day after a two-day stoppage by doctors in public and private hospitals. The health workers had been on strike since October 18 demanding increased pay and allowances.

The FCT administration has withdrawn the 2,900 letters of dismissal sent out earlier. In a thinly veiled warning that no health strikes would be tolerated in future, the FCT minister stated that his administration would no longer tolerate unethical behaviour by FCT authority staff. Signalling acceptance of what amounts to a no-strike agreement, NLC President Adams Oshiomhole thanked the minister for giving the NLC the opportunity to step in and settle the strike and assured him that such a situation would never arise again.



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