

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

16 December 2005

## Europe

### Italian journalists go on national strike

The Italian media called a national strike on December 9. The strike call instructed the press agencies not to work during the period of December 9-11, the weekend newspaper editions cancelled publication, and the news bulletins on TV channels were abridged.

The industrial action, organised by the National Press Federation of Italy, was due to media leaders failing to extend journalists' work contracts because of a dispute over reporters' independence.

### Italy's rail workers hold eight-hour stoppage

In a protest over the lack of an "industrial plan" for the company and the deterioration of the service, Italian state railway employees held an eight-hour stoppage from 9 a.m., December 12.

Turnout was high, with parts of the country recording figures close to 100 percent. Only mandatory train connections were running. The strike followed the failure of negotiations between management and unions.

### Bulgarian teachers strike over pay

Several thousand teachers across Bulgaria began an indefinite strike on December 12 to demand higher wages after talks with the government failed to reach a deal.

The National Teachers' Union said there were no classes on Monday in more than 2,000 schools and kindergartens.

The union is demanding a 15 percent pay rise for 2006, as well as an improvement in working conditions in schools. The government says it has to limit public-sector pay increases to stick to an IMF-prescribed economic programme.

Almost 2,000 teachers went on hunger strike last month to demand higher wages.

### British Gas engineers on strike over pension changes

From December 12, around 6,000 engineers at British Gas started the first of five strikes in protest at the closure of the company's final salary pension scheme to new entrants.

The workers, who repair household boilers, are holding a 24-hour strike with further action planned for December 19 and 21 and January 6 and 9.

The engineers' union leader, GMB National Secretary Brian Strutton, said members had "fully co-operated" to ensure the contingency plans, set in place by the company, would work.

The union said it had asked the company, which trades as Scottish Gas in Scotland, to suspend closing the pension scheme to new entrants for a year while the scheme was re-evaluated. However, British Gas's parent company Centrica has said its new pension package is "one of the best on the market." It said the long-term viability of the final salary scheme, to be closed to new entrants from January, depended on the changes.

### Greek trade unions protest government changes

The General Confederation of Employees of Greece (GSEE) and the civil servants' union ADEDY announced strikes on December 14 and 15, in protest at the government's intention to restructure public corporations (DEKO).

The two trade unions called a nationwide strike on December 14, while GSEE called a 24-hour strike exclusively at DEKO on December 15. With the exception of the electric railway ISAP and the Metro, which operates from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., all other means of public transport were closed to passengers.

The unions are opposed to the bill aimed at overhauling state-run enterprises, and are particularly opposed to article 14, which does away with collective

bargaining.

### **Middle East**

#### **Protest outside prime minister's Jerusalem office**

A protest by dozens of Druze municipal workers outside the prime minister's office in Jerusalem on December 7 turned violent after the demonstrators confronted a police cordon. Sticks and bottles were reportedly thrown as police tried to disperse the protest, and two demonstrators were arrested.

Druze and Circassian municipality heads claim that the government did not transfer the funds promised three months ago. A future protest was also scheduled, during which municipality workers will be joined by residents of their towns. Yircha municipality head Salah Abu Rish said that the collection of garbage has been halted and that the water supply has been stopped due to the local authority's debts. According to Rish, some NIS 600,000 could resolve the problem immediately.

### **Africa**

#### **Firestone plantation workers in Liberia on go-slow**

Rubber plantation workers at the Firestone Plantation Company in Liberia began a go-slow, according to the *Analyst* (based in the capital, Monrovia), after it came to light that the company was paying US\$3.19 per day while claiming to pay US\$10.

The workers told the paper that after deductions including social security, government taxes, medicals, education costs for children, rice supplied by the company and union fees, the workers receive take-home pay of approximately US\$1 per day. They complained of poor housing facilities and alleged that the company refused to accept their children into the company's schools.

Firestone is facing a "slavery" lawsuit in the US, filed by several human rights organisations. Samuel Kofi Woods, regional representative for the Foundation for International Dignity (FIND), one of the organisations involved, told the *Inquirer* (Monrovia) that in order to reach the impossibly high quota of tapping 750 trees a day, whole families have to work and children are unable to attend school. They have to carry buckets containing 150 pounds of latex on their shoulders for miles to the depot.

Woods described working conditions as "harsh and dehumanising" and condemned the "dilapidated housing conditions and squalor to which ordinary

labourers are subjected." He said that there is no fresh drinking water or clean water for washing, due to waste from the Firestone chemical plant that has contaminated the river.

Debester Mantah, spokesman for the plantation workers, told the *Analyst* that management turned a deaf ear to their plight, "So the only way we think they will listen is to lay down our tools, and that is just what we are doing." He said that "if they don't get satisfaction they will continue with their action and the activities of the company will stop."

#### **Namibia Dairy workers on strike over salaries and bonuses**

Workers at Namibia Dairies went out on a one-day strike on December 8 to demand a salary increase and payment of a bonus.

Namibian Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU) Acting Secretary General Kiros Sackarias told the *Namibian* that after receiving a letter from management warning that any strike would be illegal, he had advised the workers to confine their action to a demonstration during their lunch break.

However, the workers opposed the management threats and launched the strike at the start of the working day. They returned to work the following day after they were told that the CEO of the Ohlthaver and List Group of Companies, Sven Thieme, would meet with them on December 16.



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