

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

3 February 2006

Europe

Public sector health workers in Belgium strike for 24 hours

On January 26, public sector health workers staged a 24-hour strike in Belgium in protest at the government's refusal to honour an agreement over funding. Staff held a 3,500-strong demonstration in the capital Brussels in support of their demands.

The strike action affected most nursing homes and hospitals, which were forced to operate on a minimum roster. The cities most affected by the strike were Antwerp—where 6,000 to 7,000 health workers are employed in the city's public hospitals—Ghent and Brussels.

Following a meeting with trade union representatives, Federal Health Minister Rudy Demotte said that the agreement over public funding would be implemented and that the budget allocated to the plan would also be increased from €79 million to €96 million.

The agreement was signed in March 2005, and included clauses stipulating more recruitment of personnel, wage rises and improved pension schemes.

Some 70,000 to 80,000 people are employed in the public health sector in Belgium.

Jobcentre workers strike in the UK

On January 26, thousands of Jobcentre and benefit office workers began a 48-hour strike over job cuts and restructuring. The workers are employed by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which plans to shed 30,000 posts by 2008 as part of a restructuring of the service.

The stoppage resulted in disruption to services provided by job centres, benefit offices, pension centres and the Child Support Agency.

According to the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS), job losses are already well under way, with the loss of about 15,000 jobs since 2004.

The industrial action proceeded following the breakdown in talks between the DWP and trade unions.

Unions have alleged that the Jobcentre service is on the verge of collapse, with delays and computer problems, following the loss of 15,000 jobs. It added that telephone calls to Jobcentres are going unanswered, while people have to wait hours to see an adviser.

This situation has resulted in Jobcentre employees facing an increasing number of assaults from the public, due to frustration at delays. The PCS has called for the programme of cuts to be halted to allow a proper evaluation of staffing levels and a guarantee of no compulsory redundancies.

Royal Mail workers in Northern Ireland begin unofficial strike

On January 31, postal workers in Belfast, Northern Ireland walked off the job in indefinite unofficial strike action. The staff, based at the city's Tomb Street depot, struck against Royal Mail in a dispute over disciplinary procedures. The action affected deliveries in north, south and west Belfast.

On February 2, talks between trade union officials and Royal Mail management aimed at resolving the dispute ended without agreement.

A representative of the Communication Workers' Union said that it did

not support the strike and that it had asked its members to return to work.

Building workers at Heathrow Airport continue pay dispute

Construction workers employed in the building of a new fifth terminal at Heathrow airport in London began a three-day strike in a dispute over pay on January 31. The strike is the third by the construction workers who have also participated in industrial action in December and January.

The workers including scaffolders, labourers and others struck after rejecting an offer from their employers Laing O'Rourke to increase bonus pay by 80 pence an hour. Before its current offer, the company had previously offered an increase of 67 pence an hour on bonus pay.

The members of the GMB union are calling for a bonus pay increase of £1-an-hour. The workers are also engaged in a struggle with the trade union, whose shop stewards recommended that they accept the latest offer. In a series of meetings, staff overwhelmingly rejected the decision of the union leadership.

The Terminal 5 construction at Heathrow Airport is a £4 billion project and is due to be completed in 2008.

Middle East

Iranian government cracks down on bus drivers' strike

A strike planned by Tehran's bus drivers for January 28 was preemptively attacked by the Iranian government as it detained hundreds of drivers. Most of the workers remain in detention without charge or access to counsel, according to Human Rights Watch.

The bus drivers, and members of the Union of Workers of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, had organized the strike to protest against the detention of their union leader, Mansour Ossanlu, and to demand recognition of their trade union activities.

Gholamreza Mirzaii, the union's spokesman, told Human Rights Watch that on January 26 security and intelligence agents arrested the union's board of directors to disrupt the planned strike. Mirzaii said that he himself feared arrest by the authorities at any time.

The security forces also launched a pre-dawn raid on the home of Yaghub Salimi, another member of the union, on January 28. Salimi was not home at the time, but the authorities detained his wife and two children, along with the wives of two other union officials and three of their children, during the raid.

Salimi, in interviews with press outside of Iran, has stated that security forces beat and intimidated his wife and children, and that his two-year-old daughter sustained facial injuries. Authorities released his family members after Salimi presented himself to the police.

On the day of the planned strike, security and intelligence agents identified and detained hundreds of union sympathisers when they showed up for work in the morning. According to Mirzaii, the security and intelligence forces beat and physically intimidated the workers in connection with the arrests.

Mirzaii told Human Rights Watch that although the union has not been able to compile exact numbers, it believes that police detained more than 500 workers, who are being held in Evin Prison without charge. He said that the authorities later released a small number of detainees, though they

have not been allowed to return to work and company officials have threatened to fire them.

Labour dispute at Israel's leading theatre

Representatives of the Habima Theatre, Tel Aviv, are scheduled to meet Thursday in an attempt to defuse a labour dispute. Shows have continued as scheduled, but actors and other employees say they haven't yet received their December salaries.

Habima employees claim the theatre management forced them to accept a down payment for their December wages in an attempt to avoid a lawsuit for holding back wages. Arieh Katz, chairman of the employees' union, said, "We received a down payment against our will. We opposed the December advance because it is a make-believe solution and in effect stops us from declaring a wage dispute." Katz puts the blame on the theatre's public trustee: "Shlomo Shahar's job is to make sure we get paid on time. We have no clue what he does, and we couldn't care less about his dispute with the ministry of finance and the ministry of education. It's his job to force the Finance Ministry to uphold its commitments to Habima."

Katz pointed out the difficult position of most employees at the theatre. "There are theatre employees that are on the verge of getting thrown out of their apartments, because they cannot meet their mortgage payments," he said. "We don't have time to wait around. Seven years ago they did a similar stunt, when the theatre's CEO, Yaacov Agmon, cut salaries by 20 percent in a cheap trick, supposedly in a measure of solidarity. To date we haven't seen that money. If we don't get our full salaries in the coming days, we will consider different measures leading up to a strike."

Habima's management is awaiting the ruling of Justice Varda Elshich on the demand for the immediate transfer of NIS 2 million, cut from the theatre's budget by the Finance Ministry, and blames the government for the crisis.

Israeli lab workers to strike over dangerous blood-testing devices

Microbiologists and lab workers at 19 facilities of Clalit Health Services around the country went on strike January 29 to protest against management's purchase of chemical blood-testing equipment they claim endangers their health.

Clalit members' blood will not be tested starting January 29 in Jerusalem, Neshet Tel Hanan, Beilinson, Soroka and 15 other sites, the union said.

Asher Goldschlager, the union head, said that workers are justified in their opposition to the device, called Olympus, which would expose them to potentially dangerous pathogens by spraying.

The employees' decision to strike over concerns for safety was described by Clalit management as "on the edge of contempt of court."

Regarding the controversial lab machine, Clalit said that the Olympus company is among the most advanced and widely-used in the world, and has approval from the US Food and Drug Administration.

Africa

South African transport unions begin rolling strikes

On January 29, four transport unions began a programme of rolling strikes in South Africa's transport industry. The campaign began with a three-day strike affecting all transport in KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State. The strikes are being held in protest at the lack of consultation regarding the company's plans for the reorganisation of the South African transport industry. The Durban container terminal, which handles two thirds of containers leaving and entering South Africa, was effectively closed due to the action and rail services to and from Durban were also severely disrupted.

Transnet is proposing to privatise some of its businesses, including Freightdynamics, Transnet Pension Fund Administration, Autopax and Blue Train. Other enterprises, such as Transfer SAA, Metrorail and Shosholozza Meyl, would be transferred out of Transnet but would remain publicly owned, at least for the present. Also there would be reallocation

of staff from one branch of Transnet to another. The unions claim that the reorganisation will mean the loss of up to 30,000 jobs. They state that collective bargaining rights, pension rights and travel concessions are also under threat.

The four unions involved are the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union, the United Transport and Allied Trade Union, the South African Railway and Harbours Union and the United Association of South Africa.

A spokesman for the United Transport and Allied Trade Union (UTATU) claimed 100 percent support as around 15,200 workers from all four unions went on strike at the two main ports affected—Durban and Richards Bay. He said that most of the strikers in the Free State and KwaZulu-Natal were not directly affected by the restructuring and had come out in sympathy for their colleagues.

The first stage of the campaign ended with a march of 1,000 strikers through the streets of Durban on February 1. The unions handed in a memorandum to the chief executive of the South African Port Operations listing their demands.

If there is no settlement, strike action will be extended to the Eastern Cape on February 13 and to the Northern and Western Cape on the following day. Workers in Gauteng, North West, Mpumalanga and Limpopo will join the protests on February 20. A national strike is threatened for March 6.

The strike has already had a significant effect on the South African economy. According to Reuters, economic analysts' have estimated that the strike could cost the country R100 million (US\$16.4 million) a day. There are fears that a shortage of raw materials, rolling stock and feedstock could result in plant closures.

Public Enterprises Minister Alec Erwin has dismissed workers' concerns about future job losses. He made a statement on January 30 supporting the proposed changes at Transnet and urging the parastatal to proceed as quickly as possible.

On the same day, South African Airways (SAA) was trying to get the Labour Court in Johannesburg to declare the strike illegal. It claimed that since SAA was no longer officially part of Transnet's bargaining council any workers participating in the action would not be protected and thus would be subject to dismissal.

A meeting between Transnet and the unions was due to take place in Johannesburg on February 2.

South African steelworkers in wildcat strike

One hundred South African steelworkers at the Macsteel service centre in Bellville went on an all-out unofficial strike on January 23. The strikers are demanding higher pay for night shift workers after the introduction of a rotating 50-hour week. The members of the National Union of Metal Workers claim that the offer of an average of R50 (US\$8) per week would not even cover the extra transport costs of the workers involved.

Police were deployed at the picket line to get steel merchants' trucks past a barricade by about 50 strikers.



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