

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

10 March 2006

## Europe

### UK lecturers strike in pay dispute

On March 7, thousands of lecturers in the UK participated in a 24-hour strike in a dispute over pay.

Called by the further education union Natfhe and the Association of University Teachers (AUT), the action was well-supported across the country. It is to be followed by an assessment boycott which is set to affect students with coursework unmarked.

Recent statistics show that lecturers' salaries have declined in real terms by 40 percent over the past 20 years, with the average salary now less than £36,000.

### Road transport workers in Finland in pay and contract dispute

More than one-third of the Finland's road transport workers began an open-ended strike on March 5 in a dispute over wages and the terms of employment for temporary and part-time drivers.

The strike, called by the Finnish Transport Workers Union, caused disruption, especially in the Greater Helsinki area.

The union and the Road Transport Employers Association are to meet this week with the national state labour market mediator in an attempt to resolve the dispute. The mediator has put forward a proposal to end the dispute. On March 5, he suggested that the strike be suspended for three days. This was rejected by the union, which also said it did not accept the terms of the proposal.

## Middle East

### Iranian textile workers blockade highway

Textile workers at the Rahim-Zadeh Weaving Company blocked a major highway from the city of Isfahan to Tehran on March 1 to protest against non-payment of their wages. The employees have not been paid for the past three months and their annual bonus has also been withheld

The fact that the factory was not being supplied with raw materials has led many to believe that it may be heading for closure, at the cost of up to 300 jobs.

## Africa

### Zambian water workers strike over non-payment of severance pay

Some 300 former council employees, who have now been moved to new jobs at the Nkana Water and Sewerage Company (NWSC), have gone on strike to protest the non-payment of their severance packages by the government. The workers are owed a total of K19 billion (US \$5.9million), but since they were transferred, 52 of them have died without receiving their payments.

The strike started the last week of February. The branch chairman of Zambia Water and Sanitation Engineering Allied Workers Union, Livingstone Chondwe, told the *Times of Zambia* that 320 workers were affected. He said the workers were also on strike to protest against the government's policy of decentralisation, which could lead to the water utility company being returned to the local councils.

### South African airline workers continue striking for a living wage

The strike by employees of Nationwide Airlines has now continued for nearly two weeks, with no sign of a settlement. The strikers include check-in agents, baggage carriers and other ground staff.

According to South African-based *Independent Online*, their demands include the introduction of a grading system that would allow for promotion, paid maternity leave and pensions.

The on-line publication reported the situation of Dingani Mbuleli, a ramp supervisor who has worked for Nationwide for the last 10 years. He is the sole wage earner in a family of seven. He said he had never received a wage increase since joining the company.

“Living costs have gone up. The company should at least adjust our salaries so that we can survive,” he said.

### **South African Transnet unions postpone national strike**

The national strike of four Transnet unions, which was due on March 6, has been postponed for one week. The action was part of an ongoing protest by Transnet employees against lack of consultation regarding reorganisation of the South African transport industry.

The unions claim that the postponement is in order to allow workers in Gauteng to participate. In a joint statement, they claimed that the commencement of the trial of African National Congress leader Jacob Zuma in Johannesburg would “not allow a large gathering of people in the Johannesburg CBD on the same day.”

However, the postponement may be connected to the fact that two mediators, Charles Nupen and Thandi Orleyn, have now been appointed. South Africa’s *Sunday Times* has reported that the unions have agreed to mediation “without preconditions,” but that they are not prepared to cancel national strike action until they are given more information about what Transnet is prepared to offer.

### **Guinean general strike ends with below-inflation rise**

After five days of general strike action in Guinea, which started on February 27 and brought the country to a standstill, the dispute has been called off. An agreement was signed between the government and unions based on a pay rise of 30 percent for government employees, combined with a reduction in their taxes of 10 percent.

Although the leaders of the United Workers Union of Guinea have claimed victory, the settlement is far less than the 300 percent pay rise the unions were demanding

IRIN reported that on February 28 President Lansana Conte’s cavalcade was stoned by young strikers. When his bodyguards opened fire on the youths, a bystander was killed.

Both the regime and opposition parties were concerned that the strike might fuel a popular anti-government movement. The two sides are also set to negotiate on a new minimum wage and the salary scales for private sector workers.

According to United Nations figures, the average per

capita income in Guinea is \$2,097, but the majority of the population earns less than \$1 a day. The government is implementing the demands of the International Monetary Fund, including the adoption of floating exchange rates. As a result, the Guinean Franc has lost 38 percent of its value against the US dollar, putting the purchase of staple foods like rice beyond the reach of a majority of the population.



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