Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

24 March 2006

Europe

German university training hospitals doctors begin strike

On March 16, doctors at German university training hospitals took strike action in a dispute over wages, extensions in working hours, cuts in Christmas and holiday payments, and the failure of their employers to pay overtime. Doctors are calling for a pay increase of up to 30 percent in basic wages for the 22,000 doctors at university and state hospitals. The strike was called by the doctors' association Marburger Bund and began after a breakdown in negotiations between the union and the employers.

It began with one-day actions at eight hospitals attached to universities in Munich, Heidelberg and Bonn. During the strike, non-urgent care was restricted at hospitals.

On March 20, doctors at Germany's university training hospitals extended the strike action with industrial action at hospitals in 15 cities in the southern states of Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg. Stoppages were also held in the country's most populous state of North Rhine-Westphalia. The strikes have involved up 20,000 doctors.

According to the trade union, German salaried doctors employed in university hospitals work a combined total of up to 50 million hours per year in unpaid overtime. The union said that an extension of their basic contracted week without extra pay will lead to a 10 percent cut in salary.

Virgin Cross Country train guards continue strike in England

On March 17, train guards on Virgin Cross Country services in England began their 12th day of strike action in an ongoing dispute over Sunday payments. The guards are members of the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union.

The dispute follows an agreement between the union and Virgin Cross Country to implement a 35-hour working week. The union claims it would cost the company £6 per Sunday shift to settle. The company called for the trade union to resume negotiations and said that about two-thirds of the company's trains were due to run despite the strike.

Middle East

Sit down strike in Egypt

Over 1,500 workers at the Hellwan Cement company in Cairo, Egypt, took part in a sit-down strike March 19 demanding a pay increase and a share in the profits. Hellwan is run by an Italian company, but a Swiss cement factory has a controlling interest.

The workers are seeking parity with workers at the Tura Cement Company, also based in Cairo, that is controlled by the Swiss firm. Tura workers were involved in a series of strikes last year as part of protracted fight for better wages and a profit-sharing scheme.

Africa

Mozambique sugar workers in unofficial action

Workers at the Sena Sugar company took wildcat strike action March 15 in pursuit of higher wages and a five-day working week. The company had been jointly owned by the Mozambican government and a consortium of Mauritian companies. However, last month the French Tereos group invested US$30 million in the company, giving it an equal shareholding to the Mauritian consortium.

The company has vast sugar plantations and a mill at Marromeu on the southern bank of the Zambezi River. Its annual production is around 100,000 tonnes of sugar.

The workers returned after two days. A new wage scale has been promised by the company to be introduced in April—the current one has been in

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operation since 2002. Under the new wage structure the present 24 categories of work will be reduced to 6, but no details have been made available of what this will mean in terms of pay.

South African security to strike

Up to 150,000 security workers covered by 12 unions in South Africa are due to go on strike in a national pay dispute. The unions are asking for an 11 percent to 15 percent rise whilst the employers are offering 6 percent. The action is to begin with a two-day strike on March 23 involving workers in inland provinces and Western Cape. Then from March 27 workers in KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Northern Cape will also take two-day strike action. Companies such as Chubb and ADT will be affected.

Jackson Simon of Satawu explained that negotiations with the employers have been taking place since November and the strike has been authorised by the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration. Simon told *Business Day* newspaper that the unions were due to meet next week to discuss further nationwide strike action beginning April 3.

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