

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

14 April 2006

Polish doctors strike

On April 7 thousands of Polish doctors struck to demand pay increases and more funding for the health system. During the day of action a demonstration was held in the capital of Warsaw, while in the country's 650 state hospitals doctors performed only vital operations.

The government has cut health resources and spends around 6 percent of the gross domestic product on health, according to 2003 data, among the lowest levels of countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The state health sector owes 2 billion zlotys to the government and its total debt stands at around 10 billion zlotys. This is despite a government write-off of 8.4 billion zlotys in 1999. The government estimates the cost of next year's health sector pay rises at 3.7 billion zlotys. It also plans to cut taxes whilst maintaining an annual budget gap of 30 billion zlotys.

The average pay of doctors is 1,800 zlotys (US\$550) a month, only 70 percent of the average wage in industry. This has forced many to find second jobs or work overtime.

Since Poland joined the European Union in May 2004, thousands of doctors and nurses have moved to countries such as Ireland, Sweden and Britain. At least 5 percent of all Polish doctors are estimated to have left the country to seek jobs elsewhere in the European Union.

Hospital workers strike in Slovakia

Hospital workers in more than 10 cities in Slovakia, including Martin, Trnava, Banská Bystrica, Bojnice, Piešťany and Zvolen, joined a strike of their fellow workers on April 10. The walkout was started on April 6 by colleagues in Bratislava, Presov and Nitra to demand better working conditions and higher wages.

Hospital staff in the city of Košice were deciding this week whether to join the strike.

Following the initial strike action management at the

Bratislava and Prešov faculty hospitals condemned the strike as illegal and took their complaint to court on April 7. A decision on the legality of the industrial action is expected within 30 days.

Tax employees in Scotland strike against new working conditions

Hundreds of tax workers in Lothian, Scotland began industrial action on April 13 in a dispute over working procedures and conditions. The civil servants at HM Revenue and Customs sites in Livingston and Edinburgh struck following the introduction of new "lean" working procedures that the Public and Commercial Services Union described as reducing "staff to robots." The union said the new system was causing many repetitive strain injuries.

More than 800 workers were involved in the stoppage following a ballot in which the majority of 950 workers voted to support industrial action. The walkout began following a breakdown in negotiations between the management and trade unions and is expected to delay the processing of tax returns.

British trade unions suspend strike over pensions

A planned strike by local government workers against changes to their pension rights has been suspended by the trade unions. Last month one million local government workers struck against plans to scrap their right to take retirement at 60 years of age on full wages, closing many schools and public facilities across the UK.

Unions had threatened further action in the run-up to local council elections on May 4, but have now abandoned this plan so as to "facilitate negotiations." The unions also called off strikes over the same issue in the run-up to last year's General Election so as not to damage the electoral fortunes of the Blair government.

South African bus workers strike over pay

More than 14,000 bus drivers across South Africa struck April 12 over issues including an 8.5 percent wage demand, overtime pay and driver fatigue. The

drivers work for private bus operators and are members of a number of unions, including South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu) and Transport Omnibus Workers Union (Towu). The operators include Putco, Golden Arrows and Greyhound.

US-based company denies rights to Ghanaian workers

Affiliated Computer Systems (ACS), a data processing company based in the US, refuses to allow its workforce in Ghana to form a union to negotiate their conditions of service.

The workers' campaign to win the right to organise started around five years ago. ACS management responded to the campaign with threats to shut down its operation in Ghana and relocate elsewhere.

The workers told *Public Agenda*, a weekly newspaper based in Accra, that they are subject to intimidation by the management, often by summary dismissal of those voicing opposition to management's policies.

Despite laws that say workers have the right to form or join unions, many workers in Ghana are prevented from doing so, especially by transnational companies. These usually set up in the "free" zones, where workers are pressured to give up their rights, so as to attract investment from overseas.



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