

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

24 November 2006

Europe

Italian workers and students demonstrate against draft budget

On November 17, demonstrations and strikes were held in the Italian capital Rome and several other cities to protest the 2007 draft budget being implemented by the government of Prime Minister Romano Prodi. On November 20, Prodi won a vote of confidence in the Chamber of Deputies, which also supported the 2007 budget. It now goes to the Senate for approval by the end of the year.

The budget aims to implement severe cuts in public spending, largely through attacks on the welfare and benefits system. The government plans to make savings for the coming year of 33.4 billion euros, in line with the European Union stability package.

More than 300,000 workers were involved in demonstrations throughout the country. In Rome up to 80,000 protested in the rally that went from the central square Porta Pia to the Piazza Barberini.

During the day hundreds of thousands of workers struck in different sectors of industry, including bus, train, air and local transport. Bus drivers struck for two and a half hours and train drivers for three hours. Airport staff struck for eight hours. At Rome's Fiumicino airport, minor delays affected smaller airlines as the industrial action did not involve the larger trade unions. Other workers participating in the strikes included day-care teachers.

Thousands of students participated in the demonstrations, including up to 25,000 students in Palermo, 15,000 in Rome and 10,000 in Naples. Thousands of students also demonstrated in Milan.

Lawyers who had been striking since the beginning of the week also joined the demonstrations in protest at plans to eliminate minimum fees.

Northern Ireland lecturers stage fifth one-day strike

Lecturers in further education colleges throughout Northern Ireland took 24-hour strike action last week for the fifth time this year in a pay dispute. The strike on November 16 involved several thousand lecturers at 16 further education colleges. Most classes at the colleges were

cancelled.

During the day, a rally was held at the Department of Employment and Learning in Belfast and then continued at the Belfast Institute's graduation ceremony at the Spires Centre. A letter regarding the dispute was handed over to the Minister at the Department of Employment.

The lecturers are protesting the government's refusal to allow them a pay rise due to a cap on public sector pay.

The lecturers are members of the further education union, Natfhe, the teachers' union, NASUWT and the University and College Union. Previous one-day strikes took place in September and May.

Fujitsu IT Services staff strike in Manchester

On November 20, hundreds of workers at the Manchester location of Fujitsu IT Services took strike action in a dispute over pay, working conditions and union rights.

The staff struck at the Central Park and West Gorton sites of the company and also leafleted colleagues based at nearby Wakefield, Warrington and Salford. Strikers also held a protest march through the local area.

The employees, who are members of the Amicus trade union, accuse management of breaking a series of agreements on pay, union recognition, redundancy and redeployment. Amicus has threatened to hold a further two-day strike if the dispute is not resolved.

Metroline bus drivers continue strike in London

Metroline bus drivers based in London held a second 24-hour strike on November 20 in a pay dispute. The strike began at 0400 GMT and affected some 60 routes serving north and north-west London. The action also affected night bus routes to north London from Trafalgar Square.

The drivers, members of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), are calling for a 6 percent pay increase to £11 an hour. The company is offering a pay deal of 5 percent, bringing pay to £10.33 an hour.

Workers have rejected Metroline's offer, with the TGWU saying it would leave drivers up to £3,000 behind the average wage of other London bus workers.

Middle East

Israeli university staff mount warning strike

A one-hour “warning strike” was held November 21 on the Tel Aviv University campus to protest the establishment of the Shochat Committee, which many students and faculty nationwide see as biased in favour of Ministry of Finance positions on higher education.

Members of the lecturers’ unions are concerned that the committee, which was established with the agreement of the education and finance ministries and the university presidents, will recommend implementing a merit-based pay scale for lecturers. The committee is also tasked with examining tuition policy, causing concern among student unions.

Israeli civil servants threaten strike

The National Union of Government Employees has announced it is considering strike action next week, in protest at a recent Ministry of Finance, tender for the provision of banking services to civil servants, instead of the services provided by Bank Yahav for Government Employees Ltd. Histadrut, the General Trades Union Federation in Israel, owns 25 percent of Bank Yahav, the state owns 25 percent, and Bank Hapoalim owns the remaining half.

Currently, Bank Yahav is the only bank that grants preferred terms to civil servants. This places additional costs on the ministry of finance, mostly due to loan subsidies.

Banks involved in the tender are to submit their bids by December 25. The winner will provide banking services to civil servants for the next seven years.

Africa

Kenyan hospital staff in two-hour pay strike

Over 3,000 employees at the Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) in Nairobi went on strike for two hours on November 20, to demand payment of a wage increase awarded by the Industrial Court two months ago.

The strike ended after the KNH acting director, Dr Jotham Micheni, promised the increase would be paid soon, after a “technicality” had been sorted out.

The pay increase of between 9 and 15 percent should be backdated to July 1, 2005. The strikers have threatened to launch a longer strike at the hospital unless they are paid the arrears within the next 21 days.

Also in Kenya, a strike by university lecturers that began on October 23 continues. Five of Kenya’s universities remain closed, with only the University of Nairobi still working.

Education Minister George Saitoti said the university vice-chancellors had agreed to meet with the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) for negotiations. The Industrial Court had previously ruled that the vice-chancellors and UASU should negotiate a settlement out of the court, but the union insisted that it would only do so if

the management first reinstated all the sacked and suspended lecturers.

Ugandan sugar workers strike

Sugar workers employed by the Sugar Corporation of Uganda (SCOUL) are on strike after not being paid for two consecutive months. The rate of pay is only \$US30 per month. SCOUL is part of the Meththa Group, and employs more than 7,000 workers.

Joramuj Pajobo, the MP representing the workers, met with management and said they had agreed to act on the workers’ complaints. He advised the strikers to go back to work on the basis of this agreement. Representatives of the National Union of Plantation Agriculture Workers Union have agreed to end the strike.

Namibian hotel workers strike, despite state clampdown

Workers at a four-star hotel in the Namibian capital, Windhoek, have been on strike since November 15, after negotiations between management and the union reached a stalemate.

The hotel is managed by the directors of the Windhoek Country Club Resort and Casino, who obtained a court order forcing the pickets to move 30 metres away from the hotel entrance.

The management called on the Special Field Force (SFF), specially trained police who had been sent in by the government, to enforce the court order. The SFF donned gas masks in preparation to use tear gas to remove the strikers. The strikers prepared themselves by wetting their T-shirts to lessen the effects of the gas. At the last minute, however, the situation was defused by news that a government minister had called for the workers to be allowed to continue their presence. The Namibian government is the hotel’s major shareholder.



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