

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

10 November 2006

Europe

Greek teachers, students and civil servants continue protest

On November 3, demonstrators in Athens, Greece, including university students, schoolchildren and teachers, protested against proposed changes in education law. The day of action was also supported by a 24-hour strike by primary and preschool teachers and a sympathy strike by civil servants. The demonstration, attended by at least 9,000 protesters, was attacked by riot police with tear gas near the Athens Polytechnic.

During the day of action, many of the country's 3,000 secondary schools and 75 university faculties remained occupied by students. Last week, the primary teachers returned to work following a six-week strike in pursuit of their demands but said they would strike again if the pay dispute was not resolved.

Rallies and protests against the government were also held in other major cities and towns. Secondary school teachers participated, despite their trade unions having stated beforehand that they would not authorise joint industrial action.

The strike was the latest in a campaign by teachers and students to oppose government plans to end public-sector control over higher education and to establish a new grade threshold for university entrance exams.

SNCF railway staff strike in France

Railway workers employed by the state-run SNCF network in France struck on November 8 to demand increased pay and that more staff be employed. The union is also calling for more investment in the network's freight sector.

The industrial action was called by six of the rail trade unions and began late on Tuesday evening, lasting until 8:00 a.m. Thursday. The action resulted in disruption to the French train network with only around half of suburban commuter services into Paris reported running as normal. Across the country, a reported two out of three TGV high-speed trains operated as normal and just one out of three regional trains ran.

JJB sports staff in England strike

Staff employed at the warehouse of the UK sports retailer JJB Sports struck for 24 hours on November 9 in a dispute over pay and conditions. The workers, members of the GMB trade union, are based at JJB's warehouse at Wigan in Greater

Manchester. The industrial action is the third by the employees in the last two weeks, and throughout the day strikers staged picket lines outside the warehouse and at JJB sports shops across England and Scotland.

The GMB has alleged that employment agencies illegally supplied staff during last week's strike and has complained that the Employment Agencies Standards Inspectorate has failed to enforce the law by taking action against the agencies involved.

Gas station employees in Spain strike in dispute over pay, working hours

On November 7, thousands of gas station employees in Spain began a 24-hour strike to demand better pay, a reduction of working hours and increased overtime payments. For the duration of the industrial action, long queues of motorists waited outside gas stations in the main Spanish cities.

The strike had a significant impact. The Industry Ministry said that just 20 percent of petrol stations operated during the stoppage.

Spain's two main trade unions, the UGT and Commissions Obreras, called the action in support of demands for an annual pay increase of €600 and a reduction of 8 hours in the 40-hour working week. Other demands are for a €60 bonus payment for working Sundays and national holidays and a payment for overtime. According to the UGT, workers in the sector earn €800 before taxes per month.

Lisbon subway staff stage industrial action

Workers employed on the subway in Lisbon, Portugal, staged strike action on November 7 in protest at the end of a collective bargaining agreement. The agreement is scheduled to terminate in 2007. The strike was the sixth such protest this year and led to a buildup of congestion on Lisbon's road transport system. The collective bargaining agreement has been in force for the last 30 years, and employees are demanding that it remain until 2011.

The strike began at 6:30 a.m. and ended at midday. The industrial action was called by the Federation of Urban Transport Unions, which said that almost all of its subway members participated in the stoppage.

Shipbuilding workers in Finland strike to defend foreign workers' rights

On November 3, 1,600 workers at the Aker Yards in Turku, in southwest Finland, struck in protest at the treatment of

foreign employees. According to a local trade union, several foreign subcontractors have broken the law on required working standards, including the payment of the minimum working wage applicable in the Finnish shipbuilding industry.

It emerged that one Lithuanian subcontractor was paying its staff just €1.51 per hour. Other findings of firms flouting employment law over issues of healthcare services and working hour records have also been uncovered. In response, Aker Yards, part of the Norwegian multinational Aker Group, said the company will demand all its subcontractors honour the Finnish collective agreement that covers the industry and adhere to the Finnish labour legislation.

Middle East

Israeli airport workers strike against proposed job cuts

Around 500 employees at Ben Gurion Airport struck November 1 over the layoffs of 120 temporary workers. The strike resulted in chaos in departures and arrivals.

The airport workers defied an order issued days before by the Tel Aviv District Labour Court to return to work, refusing to load luggage onto the planes and forcing many planes to depart without their passengers' bags. At midday, the workers shut down the main luggage belt that carries the baggage off the planes. More than 24 airliners stood waiting to have boxes and suitcases unloaded by early evening. By November 3, outgoing flights were being delayed up to six hours, and several left without passengers' luggage.

The National Labour Court in Jerusalem decided on November 5 that the Israel Airports Authority (IAA) had the right to fire 120 temporary workers and ruled that a demand from the IAA management must take effect, forcing some 500 workers at the airport back to work. Union representatives were also told that any violation of the order could subject striking workers to monetary fines.

On November 5, the IAA announced its intention to put on hold its decision to dismiss the 120 of its temporary employees whilst negotiations are held.

Africa

Namibian mine workers continue strike action

More than 330 miners who work at the Rosh Pinah mine and are members of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia are continuing their strike action that began on October 29. The workers had struck in support of pay increases of between 12 and 14 percent dependent on grade. The company had offered between 8 and 9 percent, which they claimed was above the rate of inflation, and have not come up with an improved offer.

The union and management were due to meet November 3, but according to a report in the *Namibian* newspaper, the union pulled out at the last minute. The company has sent letters to all its employees stating the offer was final and should be accepted.

The mining company is part of the South African-based Kumba Resources Group. The zinc ore is sent to South Africa for refining, and the company has threatened to use sources

from other countries if the strike continues.

Ghana teachers' strike now in third month

More than 7,000 teachers belonging to the National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT) began strike action September 1 over poor conditions. They have been joined in some areas of Ghana by teachers belonging to the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT).

The teachers' action has led the executive director of Children's Rights International in Ghana to call on former pupils to provide funds to pay the salaries of teachers prepared to break the strike.

In a separate move, the president of the Ghana Institute of Management (GIM) has called on the government to hold talks with the unions involved. On October 31, the High Court in Accra ruled that NAGRAT should end its strike and that its members resume work. NAGRAT appealed the ruling, and the strike continues.

Kenyan lecturers' strike enters third week

Strike action by university lecturers at Kenya's six public universities began October 23. The lecturers took action in support of improved pay and conditions. A court ruling declared the strike illegal, but five of the universities remain closed as a result of the lecturers' action, and only Nairobi remains open.

Talks that took place on Monday between officials of the lecturers' union, Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU), and a forum of University vice-chancellors broke down with no agreement. The talks had been scheduled prior to the vice-chancellor's meeting with Education Minister Noah Wekesa on Tuesday, November 7.

Ugandan lecturers begin strike action

Nearly 1,000 university staff at Makerere University began strike action at the end of last week. They took action following the government's failure to honour an agreement to increase academic staff pay made in April 2004. The staff belong to the Makerere University Academic Staff Association (MUASA).

The union demand is for professors to receive a basic monthly salary of sh2.8m (US\$1,550) and lecturers to receive sh1.5m (US\$830). Their salaries are currently sh1.4m (US\$770) and sh0.9m (US\$495), respectively.



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