

Workers' Struggles: Europe and Africa

17 November 2006

Europe

Portuguese public sector staff strike against spending cuts

On November 9, public sector workers throughout Portugal began a 48-hour national strike to protest government plans to cut public spending. Trade unions organising the campaign said that up to 80 percent of the country's 700,000-strong workforce participated. Government offices, schools and hospitals were closed, and rubbish was uncollected.

The government plans to reduce the public sector workforce by 75,000 and has pushed a bill through parliament aimed at reducing Portugal's budget deficit from 4.6 percent in 2006 to 3.7 percent in 2007. This is in line with EU public spending restrictions.

Doctors strike in primary care sector in Spain

On November 10, doctors in nine regions across Spain began strike action to demand better working conditions. The striking doctors are employed in clinics and hospitals that deal with primary care. The doctors' organisation, "Platform 10 Minutes," called on its members to stop work for 24 hours and said that it wanted to prevent the "collapse" of emergency services.

The action involved some 30,000 doctors in Madrid, Andalucía, Aragon, Asturias, Castilla y Leon, Castilla La Mancha, Galicia, Navarre and Valencia.

Public transport workers in Holland strike to protest deregulation

On November 15, transportation workers struck for 24 hours in the four largest cities in Holland. The employees are protesting the deregulation of public transportation and fear worsening working conditions and pay.

During the action in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht, trams, buses and subways ran during the morning rush hour, but conductors didn't check tickets or accept money. During the rest of the day no trams or buses operated. A demonstration was also held at The Hague as the strike was taking place.

This year, the governing Christian Democrats passed legislation allowing the opening up of the transport networks of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht to competition. Similar measures are already in place in the rest of the country.

The FNV trade union stated this week that the strike was aimed at putting pressure on Traffic Minister Karla Peijs to reverse or postpone the legislation for at least two years.

Postal workers in northern Poland demand better pay

and conditions

Postmen in the Pomeranian province in northern Poland took strike action on November 16 in a dispute over working conditions and pay. Hundreds of workers joined the strike, which had a widespread impact. Hundreds of companies did not receive mail, and queues formed at post offices as thousands of people waited to receive benefit and pension cheques.

Postal workers' grievances were heightened due to the current local elections in the city of Gdansk. Postal workers' mailbags have been made heavier with additional free-of-charge election communications being distributed by parties in the election campaign.

A postman in Gdansk interviewed in the local press said, "I was fed up with carrying a 30-kilo bag every day. We are forced to carry heavy bags that are too heavy and we earn too little."

A Polish postal worker beginning the job earns just €200 per month, while an experienced postal worker receives just €500.

BBC technical staff walk off the job over new rotas

A 24-hour strike by technical staff employed by the BBC began on November 15. The action was called by the broadcasting trade union BECTU following a 95 percent vote in favour by its members. The technicians normally deal with live news feeds as well as provide technical support.

The vote by staff was in protest at the imposition of new working patterns with more shifts. The new rotas see shifts cut back from 12 hours to between 8 and 10 hours, although total working hours will not be reduced.

The strike began at 10 p.m., when around 100 members of the union walked off the job. Technicians picketed the BBC Television Centre in west London, while others protested at the London news centre. The action affected production of BBC1's "10 O'clock News" and BBC2's "Newsnight." Live reporting on both was scaled back during the strike. The union said that more industrial action is scheduled to take place on November 23 and 24 pending the resolution of the dispute.

Bus drivers strike London company

Bus workers employed by Metroline held the first bus strike in London for seven years on November 14. The workers struck in a dispute over pay, leading to severe disruption on 60 bus routes serving north, central and west London and parts of Hertfordshire. Major routes out of King's Cross, Wembley, Holloway, Perivale, Edgware, Willesden and Cricklewood were

affected as well as many night bus routes to North London out of Trafalgar Square.

The action was called by the Transport and General Workers' Union to demand a 6 percent wage increase to take their members' pay from £10.43 an hour to £11. Additional strikes will be held November 20 and 27 if the dispute is not resolved.

Africa

Nigerian Airline Authority weather staff strike

Workers at the Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NIMET) began three days of national strike action from midnight November 13. They are members of the National Union of Air Transport Employees (NUATE).

The issues include the late payment of salaries, non-payment of leave grants, the refusal to pay course and transfer allowances, and non-payment of gratuities and pensions.

According to the union, it has been seeking negotiations with the NIMET management for the last seven months. The acting general secretary, Gideon Ogbuji, pointed out that letters sent in September and October were ignored, and management failed to turn up to a recent meeting.

Also, according to the union, the workers are owed around N160 million (US\$1.25 million). The director general of NIMET claims it has set aside N5 million (US\$39,000) towards the workers' claim.

Ugandan university authorities squeeze striking academic staff

The strike action by nearly 1,000 academic staff at Makerere University, which began November 5, continues. The lecturers, who belong to the Makerere University Academic Staff Union (MUASA), are protesting against the university's refusal to honour a pay agreement made in April 2004.

The University Council management body froze all non-salaried allowances paid to staff and banned them from using facilities such as laboratories and vehicles. It also demanded keys to vehicles and offices be handed over and barred access to the university web site via the Internet. The strikers' e-mail accounts were also disabled.

Chairman of MUASA, Dr. Augustus Nuwagaba, told the *Monitor*, "I thought we would be working together but blocking us from accessing our own offices now puts an impingement on the goodwill to the whole negotiation process."

The University Council lifted all the restrictions on November 15, except the payment of top-up allowances.

In a separate development, around 200 hundred postgraduate doctors at Mulago hospital have stopped work. The doctors normally work under the supervision of academic staff at Makerere University. They are using the lecturers' strike to pursue their own grievances, explaining that they are unable to be supervised because of the lecturers' strike action.

Dr. Michael Bukenya, chair of the Post Graduate Students Association, explained that the postgraduates have been campaigning to be recognised by the hospital as staff and

receive payment. Speaking to the *Monitor*, he explained, "In East Africa postgraduate students are taken as hospital staff. But here, you are considered university students."

Administrative staff at the university have now taken the university to court in pursuit of pay increases.

Zimbabwe: Doctors take action to protest the state of medical care

Early in November student doctors at the Mpilo Central and United Bulawayo hospitals took strike action over lack of medicines, food and basic equipment.

Reported on November 8 on *ZimOnline*, Irvin Zimudzi, a student doctors' representative, explained, "This morning we had a meeting with officials from the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare and they indicated that funds have been released for the purchase of medicines and other resources. However, we will not resume our duties as we first want to assess the situation and prove that the resources have really been made available."

A recent statement issued by the Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights stated that health facilities have "become death traps, as patients continue to die unnecessarily due to drug shortages."

Namibian hotel workers due to resume strike action

Members of the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU) at the prestigious Windhoek Country Club and Resort were due to resume strike action on November 15.

The workers, who also took action at the end of October, voted 178 to 1 for strike action last week. The union's current demand is for across-the-board salary increases of N\$145 (US\$20) and a housing allowance of N\$100 (US\$14), backdated to March. Management's offer is for a N\$100 salary increase and N\$60 (US\$8) housing allowance, dated back to July.



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