

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

8 December 2006

Europe

Postal workers in Portugal strike to protest hiring of sub-contractors

Postal workers in Portugal staged a 24-hour industrial action on December 4 to protest the hiring of sub-contractors to do their jobs. The strike led to a disruption in the delivery of mail, but did not affect the opening of post offices.

The postal workers' trade union called the strike and estimated that about 76 percent of the country's 13,000 postal staff participated in the action. As part of the strike action, postal workers held an afternoon demonstration in the centre of Lisbon.

Spain: Telemadrid workers strike to oppose privatisation

Staff at the Spanish regional TV station, Telemadrid, took 24-hour strike action on December 5 to oppose plans by the regional government to privatise the publicly-owned institution.

During the day, the *Salvemos Telemadrid* organisation (Let's Save Telemadrid) organised a demonstration outside the regional government headquarters in Puerta del Sol. The workers are demanding the resignation of Telemadrid General Director Manuel Soriano.

Mental health staff in Manchester, England demonstrate against cuts

Mental health staff in Manchester, northwest England, protested on December 6 against cuts being implemented by management. The workers are mainly occupational therapists, support workers, therapists and nurses working for Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust.

Some 100 staff were involved in the protest, during which they drove through city centre streets in cars. The cars left the Showcase Cinema car park on Hyde Road at noon before travelling through Manchester city centre to the trust's headquarters in Chorlton.

Management plans to cut 33 community nurses and six occupational therapists from the trust and are attempting

to rationalise this by increasing the number of social workers. Last March the trust axed 37 clinical posts.

A community nurse and representative of the Unison trade union, Karen Reissmann, said this week, "The proposals are being presented as an improvement, but we would have twice as many patients each and that means that we would have half the time to provide care."

Siberia: Housing and Communal Services staff in Khakassia begin hunger strike

On December 7, Housing and Communal Services (HCS) workers in Khakassia, south central Siberia, began a hunger strike to demand back payment of wages. The workers claim that they have not been fully paid for six months. At present the total wages owed is more than \$700 to each worker.

During the strike the workers were taking only emergency calls. The strike began after the bakery, which gave the staff bread on salary credit, dissolved its contract with HCS.

The Ust-Abakansky District administration attempted to prevent the hunger strike by announcing that \$180,000 was expected to be allocated from the budget to clear the liabilities in the near future.

The HCS workers previously protested the non-payment in wages with a strike in October.

Middle East

Israeli civil servants strike shuts down services

Around 600,000 civil servants came out on strike on November 30, effectively shutting down all essential Israeli government services. Public sector staff are protesting delays in the payment of salaries to local government and religious council employees and firefighters.

The action grounded outgoing flights at Ben-Gurion International Airport, paralyzed seaports and train lines, and closed all land borders, government offices, employment bureaus, courts, National Insurance Institute (NII) branches and the Israel Lands Administration. Oil

Refineries were also affected, prompting business fears of a national shortage of gasoline.

The National Labour Tribunal heard petitions filed by major business sector organizations seeking an end to the strike. Histadrut labour federation chair Ofer Eini said that the strike would continue until there was a clear blueprint to end the payment delays.

The union blames the problem on the Treasury's failure to fulfil an agreement under which it was to transfer money to local governments to pay salaries by September 30. "We declared a labour dispute on July 12, but hostilities broke out in the North that day and we decided to allow the nation to recover. Local government workers are fed up," read a Histadrut statement.

The Manufacturers Association petition asked the labour court to issue an injunction ordering the Treasury, Interior Ministry and Union of Local Authorities to resolve the problem of withheld pay checks and social benefits within seven days, under court supervision. The organisation says each day of the strike is costing 350 million New Israeli Shekels, mostly by paralyzing exports and imports.

The Federation of Chambers of Commerce cited a higher figure in its petition, claiming that the first day of the strike had already cost Israel NIS500 million.

Treasury wages director Eli Cohen has instructed ministry directors general and civil service employers to dock striking workers' wages. The memo orders payroll divisions to withhold wages relative to the extent of the strike: in units that operate at partial capacity, partial wages will be paid; in units that go on full strike, all wages will be withheld. Some 42 municipalities still have not paid their employees back wages.

Africa

Uganda: Kyambogo University academic staff set to strike

Workers belonging to the Kyambogo University Academic Staff Association (KYSASA) were due to begin strike action at the end of last week.

The University council had pleaded for staff not to take action, citing the disruption of exams. However, Victor Lucoro, the KYSASA leader, speaking to the *Ugandan New Vision* newspaper stated, "We told them pleading is not enough. For a long time we have forwarded the lecturers' grievances but they have not been solved. They are trying to solve some but it is taking too long."

Rwanda: Road construction workers' demonstration

Hundreds of angry road construction workers in the

Munaga district took to the streets protesting the late payment of wages. They are working on the construction of a 5 kilometer highway and feeder roads.

They are employed jointly by a construction firm and the local government district. The initial target of their anger was the contractor Victor Gatari. Police intervened to get him away from the area. The workers then directed their protest at the local mayor's office.

The workers' rate of pay is just under one US dollar a day.

Namibia: Court interpreters threaten strike

Court interpreters belonging to the Namibia Public Workers' Union are threatening strike action in pursuit of parity with legal clerks.

A report in *The Namibian* newspaper states the Ministry of Justice favours a re-grading, but the Department of Public Service in the Office of the Prime Minister was stalling. At a recent meeting between the union and employers, the team from the Public Service Department requested the union put forward a fresh proposal justifying their claim.

The paper quotes a court interpreter dismissing the request to the union for a fresh proposal, saying: "We feel it is a bit of a delaying tactic."

Some court interpreters in Windhoek have stopped doing clerical duties in pursuit of their claim.

Zimbabwe: Electricity workers strike

Workers of the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) walked off the job last week demanding a 100 percent cost of living rise and an increase in housing and travel allowances.

The walkout was in response to a letter from management saying it could not meet the demand. Management has made an offer of 50 percent and an increase in travel allowances.

The *Financial Gazette* of Harare quotes the workers' response: "As workers, we have made it clear to management that we want a sustainable adjustment to our salaries..."

Currently, inflation in Zimbabwe is running at around 1,000 percent.



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