Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

5 January 2007

Europe

Postal workers in Leeds, England strike

Postal workers employed at the Royal Mail Seacroft delivery office in Leeds, West Yorkshire walked off the job in a wildcat strike during the morning on January 3. The postal workers were protesting the amount of junk mail they were asked to deliver. The action involved some 200 employees and affected mail deliveries to people in the city with LS14 and LS15 postcodes.

Casino staff strike in north London

On January 31 staff at four London casinos began strike action in a dispute over pay.

The 350 croupiers, cashiers, restaurant staff and valets are employed by Grosvenor Casinos and are protesting its offer of a 3.5 percent wage rise.

During the strike the staff picketed outside several of the Grosvenor Casinos in the capital.

The Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) called the strike and reported that the company had initially refused to negotiate over what the union described as a "below-inflation offer." TGWU regional organiser Rose Keeping said, "Members are worried about the rising living costs they face in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Grosvenor can well afford a decent pay rise this year and if they want their staff to work on one of their busiest nights of the year, they should pay them what they deserve."

England: Central Trains strike continues

Staff at Central Trains continued their dispute this week by holding a 48-hour strike on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. The dispute is centred on bonus pay and holiday rotas.

Train services were affected mainly in the West and East Midlands and on cross country services from the east of England. The company ran no trains in Leicestershire, Shropshire and Warwickshire and closed many other local routes. Lower level disruption to services occurred on lines to Norwich, Cardiff, Cleethorpes and Manchester.

Civil service trade union announces national strike ballot

This week the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) announced that it had begun a ballot of its 280,000 civil service members across England for industrial action. Announcing the ballot on January 2, the union stated that the government had failed to give assurances on job security, driven down pay and pursued a "dogmatic policy of outsourcing and privatization."

The PCS members are spread over 200 government departments, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. A one-day national strike on January 31 has been proposed by the PCS if there is a mandate for industrial action.

The UK government is planning to cut a total of 100,000 civil and public service jobs at the same time as it is increasing the numbers of consultants. It has already announced the first wave of compulsory redundancies in the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and Department for Trade and Industry (DTI). Thousands of further job losses have also been announced in Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). A total of 25,000 jobs are set to be lost in the HMRC.

It is expected that several other departments will announce plans to cut staff levels as they have had their budgets cut by 15 percent over the period from 2008 to 2011.

Italian airline unions threaten strike

Five trade unions at the Italian airline Alitalia have threatened to hold a second 24-hour strike on January 19 if the government does not negotiate with them over the company's privatisation.

Members of the unions staged a previous strike on December 15, which had a widespread impact and disrupted many scheduled flights. The unions involved represent 70 to 80 percent of staff at Alitalia.

The government plans to sell a stake of at least 30.1

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percent of Alitalia over the next six months. This would amount to it ceding control of its 49.9 percent stake in the loss-making airline. The unions have been at pains to state that they are not opposed to privatisation in principle, but want to be involved in negotiations over the future of the company.

Andrea Cavola, the leader of the Sult union, said last week, “On January 19, there will be no flying because the government continues to stay away from meeting with the unions. We are not against the privatization, but want to know what will happen to the workers.”

Africa

Rwandan lecturers fired after demanding a pay rise

Ten lecturers at the Universite Libre de Kigali (ULK) in Rwanda were fired after demanding a pay rise of between Frw 50,000 and 70,000 (US$95-133) per month. The rector of the university, Prof. Thomas Rusuhuzwa Kigabo, resigned in protest after the lecturers had been dismissed. He accused the chancellor of denying the right of the board to be involved in deciding such matters.

One of the sacked lecturers told the *New Times* (a Kigali-based newspaper) that “a small clique has taken the whole university hostage. It has become a family business.” The lecturer also said that the university had not met their earlier wage demands, in spite of the long hours they spend at work. The *New Times* reported that the lecturers’ current salaries range from Frw 220,000 to 250,000 (US$418-475) per month.

South African bakery workers strike over loss of holidays

Workers at the two largest Albany bakeries in Cape Town, South Africa have walked out on strike in protest at a management decision that would force them to work on public holidays. The decision goes against a time-honoured agreement opposing such forced holiday working.

The management has flown in fitters and electricians from as far away as the capital, Johannesburg, to take the place of the striking workers.

The union to which the strikers belong, the Food and Allied Workers’ Union (FAWU), said that the strike would continue until the Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) service stepped in to mediate.

Zimbabwean junior doctors’ strike joined by seniors

The strike that began before Christmas at Mpilo Hospital in Bulawayo has now spread to all the major hospitals throughout Zimbabwe. Senior doctors at the major hospitals have now joined the strike in support of the pay demands of their junior colleagues.

The junior doctors currently receive around Z56,800 (US$236) a month in pay and an additional Z$57,000 (US$237) in the form of various allowances. This is below the official poverty line.

Hospital Doctors’ Association President Kudakwashe Nyamutukwa told *ZimOnline*, “The government should pay doctors reasonable salaries to prevent skilled medical personnel from migrating to other countries. We also need an immediate improvement of our working conditions in all government hospitals.”

According to *SW Radio Africa*, Health Minister Dr. David Parirenyatwa called off a meeting with the doctors’ representatives, “telling the doctors he would only negotiate with them once they had returned to work.” He was also said to have threatened them with “drastic” measures.

Zimbabwe’s health service has suffered a catastrophic decline in recent years due to the lack of funds and essential medicines.

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