

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

12 January 2007

Europe

Students and public sector workers in Greece protest attacks on higher education

On January 10 students and workers demonstrated in a number of Greek cities, including the capital Athens, against the government's plans to introduce private universities.

In Athens, protesters were supported by public sector workers who held a five-hour work stoppage to coincide with a 7,000-strong march. Due to the protests much of central Athens was closed and public transport schedules disrupted. Many carried banners, including some denouncing "Education for a Select Few." As the march reached parliament police fired tear gas on the demonstrators in an attempt to disperse the protest.

In other towns and cities university students held sit-ins at several facilities. The government has insisted it will implement its plans over the head of any opposition, stating, "The reforms will take place. That is not negotiable."

Musicians at the Teatro Comunale in Bologna, Italy strike in pay protest

Musicians at the Teatro Comunale opera house in Bologna staged strike action this week in a pay dispute. The action was held on January 9 and 10 to coincide with performances of Puccini's *La Boheme*, the company's first opera of the year. Teatro Comunale said last week that the performances would continue accompanied by a solo pianist.

The strike action was called by the Autonomous Italian Federation of Show Workers, which has been in dispute for several months over unpaid back pay, including claims for overtime pay. Last week the union stated that management's offer to pay 50 percent of all back claims was not acceptable and authorised the strike.

The dispute at Teatro Comunale is the latest at Italy's 14 subsidised opera houses that are being subjected to government budget cuts. In 2005 strikes by staff and

musicians in opposition to cuts at the renowned La Scala theatre in Milan led to the cancellation of many performances.

London Underground cleaners protest job losses

On January 8 some 30 staff employed by London Underground Tube Lines contractor ISS protested at City Hall, the headquarters of London Major Ken Livingstone, against plans to cut more than 200 cleaning jobs. The workers are members of the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union.

Tube Lines recently cut its cleaning budget and ISS has issued a 90-day redundancy notice to its employees, who are to lose their jobs by the end of March. The job losses follow a three-year period in which Tube Lines has reported a profit of £160 million since its contract to maintain the Northern, Jubilee and Piccadilly lines began.

Fujitsu workers in Manchester, England set to continue strike action

Fujitsu workers in Manchester, northwest England were to continue strike action on January 11/12. The workers are in dispute with the company over redundancy rights, union recognition and pay. An earlier strike and rally was held in the city on November 20.

The workers are members of the Amicus trade union, which called the strike following a breakdown in talks with management. The union had suspended a previous strike last month in order to hold talks with the Arbitration Conciliation and Advisory Service (ACAS) and the company. But the union's willingness to accept binding arbitration was rejected by Fujitsu, ending the talks.

Africa

Steelworkers on go-slow in Zambia

Zambian steelworkers at the Saxon Steel Company in Lusaka have been staging a go-slow since January 9, in protest at not being paid for the last two months. In addition to demanding their last two salary payments,

the workers are also challenging the poor conditions and lack of safety clothing at their workplace.

Zimbabwean bank workers stopped from striking by secret police

Bank workers are facing attack by state intelligence agents if they go on strike, according to a report by *ZimOnline*. The workers at all the branches of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) were expecting to go on strike unless their employer paid promised bonuses. *ZimOnline* reported in a January 10 article that agents of the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) have been sent out to thwart the plans for a strike.

“They (CIO) told us that the consequences of striking would be dire, and most workers are not taking such threats lightly, considering the brutal nature of the intelligence operatives,” the online journal quoted one worker saying at the RBZ branch in Bulawayo.

Electricity workers return to work in Zimbabwe

Electricity workers at the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) have returned to work the day after they walked out on unofficial strike, demanding an urgent pay increase. The union at ZESA, the Zimbabwe Electricity and Energy Workers’ Union (ZEEWU), has entered talks with management under arbitration.

ZEEWU Assistant Secretary-General Gibson Mushunje told the *Herald* newspaper, “The strike was initiated by workers and the union is bound by the collective bargaining process not to be part of the strike.” The article quoted the management saying that 135 workers had been suspended for “participating in the illegal job action.”

Some ZESA employees earn as little as US\$91 a month, barely enough to pay rent for a single room. The Consumer Council of Zimbabwe recently estimated the cost of living—including items such as transport and rent—as just over US\$800 a month for an average family of six. Many of the more skilled workers have emigrated.



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