

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

19 January 2007

Greek students and education workers continue protests

On January 17, students protesting government plans to allow the establishment of private universities in Greece were attacked by riot police as they marched on Parliament.

The 3,000-strong demonstration in the capital, Athens, was one of several held nationwide. As the protesters neared the main Syntagma Square, close to the parliament building where the education reforms were being debated, police set up a barricade and attacked the demonstrators with volleys of tear gas.

To carry through its proposals, the government is seeking to revise Article 16 of the constitution in order to sanction private universities. Students fear that this will lead to a lowering of education standards and result in a cut in funding to state universities.

On the same day, many university faculties were forced to close in Greece due to a 24-hour strike by professors in support of the students' demands. This week, teachers in the state sector also voted to support a series of rolling strikes in opposition to the proposals.

The legislation is expected to be passed in late February and has the support of both the conservative government and the opposition Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK). Between them, the parties hold 276 of the 300 parliamentary seats.

Doctors in Greece strike over work conditions and funding

On January 15, doctors employed at state hospitals in Greece began a five-day strike to demand better working conditions, including restrictions on working hours. The industrial action affected state hospitals in Athens and Piraeus, where treatment was carried out on an emergency-only basis.

The doctors say their current working hours are excessive and a potential risk to public health. They are also demanding the employment of more health workers and that extra funding be made available in the

forthcoming health budget.

British Airways cabin crew record massive vote for industrial action

Cabin crew employed by British Airways voted earlier this week by an overwhelming majority to take industrial action in a dispute over pay, staffing levels and sick leave.

On January 16, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) announced that 96.1 percent of its cabin crew members had voted in favour of strike action, on a turnout of more than 80 percent. The union said that strike action could be held as early as next week or during the half-term school holiday next month. The latter is traditionally a period when airlines are very busy due to increased family travelling.

The vote follows efforts by British Airways to implement a restructuring programme over the next two years, designed to cut its costs by £450 million. The TGWU said that workers have many grievances, including the abolition of some higher pay grades and claims that employees are being forced to work when they are unwell under new absence procedures.

London Underground workers to ballot for strike action

Workers on the London Underground, the capital's subway network, are to be balloted on strike action over pay, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) announced Thursday.

Some 6,500 employees, including drivers and station staff, are to be balloted over a pay award that was due last April. The result will be known in mid-February, the RMT said.

French Eurotunnel staff demand pay parity with British workers

Last week, French workers employed by Eurotunnel PLC threatened to strike in pursuit of a 3 percent pay increase, the same rate as that won by British workers. According to the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, the company has offered its staff a 1.9 percent pay deal. No

date has yet been set for the action.

Council workers, doctors and nurses on strike in Zimbabwe

Council workers in Gwanda, in the south of Zimbabwe, have gone on strike, demanding a pay rise of 350 percent to stave off the effects of hyperinflation.

Most council workers take home less than Z\$40,000 (US\$160) per month, far less than the official poverty line. Inflation is currently more than 1,280 percent—higher than anywhere else in the world.

Hospitals in Zimbabwe have now ground almost completely to a halt, as nurses have joined the strike by hospital doctors. Nurses at the Mpilo and United Bulawayo Hospitals (UBH) have been on go-slow for the past fortnight. On January 9, they resolved to go out on strike as well, to demand an increase in their own pay of Z\$70,000 per month. Only student nurses remain on duty in Zimbabwe's main hospitals.

Sugarcane cutters on strike in Uganda

Around 400 sugarcane cutters have been on strike in Uganda since January 7, according to an article in the *Monitor* newspaper. They are demanding a rise in their daily wages from Shs3,000 (US\$1.73) to Shs7,000 (US\$4.03).

The management of the Kinyara Sugar Works Out Growers' Scheme (KSWOGS) have so far refused to offer any increase at all, claiming that they do not have enough money to do so.

Kenyan cane transport workers strike to oppose dismissals

Around 1,000 sugarcane transport workers went out on strike for four days recently in Kenya to oppose the sacking of 12 shop stewards last year. The strikers also complain of harassment and bad working conditions.

The strike affected operations at the Mumias Sugar Company, which contracted the transport firms to supply sugarcane. It was ended after the intervention of Labour Minister Newton Kulundu, who brokered negotiations between the workers' union and their employers.

According to the *Nation* newspaper, after a lengthy meeting it was agreed that all workers—including the sacked stewards—would return to work. However, the strikers' representative is quoted saying that there would be no return to work unless some of the contractors were blacklisted by Mumias. It is not yet clear whether this demand was met.

Ghanaian cocoa workers demand payment

Around 640 Ghanaian cocoa workers have been on strike since January 1 in protest that the company they work for has been handed over to new owners without their outstanding allowances being paid.

The workers are cocoa carriers, loaders and tarpaulin handlers of the Cocoa Marketing Company (CMC). They are demanding payment of the company severance package, as well as payment of their Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT) deductions. The latter have been deducted from their wages, but have not been paid into the SSNIT fund. CMC has employed these workers for more than four years but have terminated their contract without any prior notification or discussion.



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