

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

2 February 2007

Europe

Civil servants strike in UK to protest job losses, low pay and privatisation

On January 31, 200,000 civil servants throughout the UK staged a day of strike action to protest job losses, low pay and privatisation. The action closed many government departments and services, including tax offices, Job Centres, benefit offices, driving exam centres, courts, coastguards and customs offices.

The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) called the strike over an ongoing dispute with the government that began in 2004 when Chancellor Gordon Brown announced that 104,000 civil servant jobs would be cut across the UK by 2011.

Another of the main issues in the dispute is low pay, with a quarter of civil servants earning less than £15,430, according to the PCS.

The stoppage was organised to coincide with the last day for self-assessment tax returns being processed by HM Revenue & Customs department. The processing of up to half a million tax returns was affected by the strike. In London, the Tate Modern and Tate Britain art galleries were closed, as were the majority of others in the capital.

In Wales, up to 23,000 civil servants joined the strike. A number of demonstrations and rallies were held in Cardiff, Bangor, Aberystwyth, Carmarthen, Newport, Swansea and Wrexham. Debates at the Welsh assembly were cancelled due to the strike and the Senedd debating chamber closed to the public.

More than 10,000 civil servants jobs are set to be lost in Wales, which has proportionally more civil servants jobs than any other part of the UK. One civil servant, Margaret Davies, told the BBC, "We're undergoing a consultation where the UK government intend moving work out of Merthyr tax office and centralising it in Cardiff. A lot of people are not going to be able to travel to Cardiff. They won't be able to make the journey with public transport as it is in the Valleys. We in Merthyr are worried about our jobs. We're worried whether our jobs will even exist in a year's time and we feel we need to strike to get the point over to central government that we will not be treated this way."

According to the PCS, more than 90 percent of civil servants in Scotland participated in the strike, with picket lines assembled at every government office. This week's industrial action is set to be followed by a two-week overtime ban.

Civil servants strike in Murcia, Spain

On January 25 civil servants in Murcia, Spain, began strike action in a pay dispute. They staged a demonstration in Murcia town centre, leading to the disruption of traffic. The City Hall civil servants comprise 2,000 of Murcia Council's 2,500 municipal staff.

TGWU calls off strike against British Airways

British Airways and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) announced January 29 that a planned two-day strike had been called off and an agreement reached in a dispute over pay, pensions and sickness leave.

The TGWU represents 11,000 out of the airline's 14,000 cabin crew. The strike was due to take place on January 30 and 31 and would have affected most of BA's domestic and international flights. Another two 72-hour strikes scheduled for February were called off.

The agreement followed more than 120 hours of negotiations between the airline and the TGWU. Under the terms of the new deal, cabin crew receive a 4.6 percent increase for this year. While this is 0.2 percent above current inflation, the new award, which should have been made last year, will not start until next month. A 2008 pay award will be tied to inflation.

An agreement on changes to wage structures is also tied to a reduction in the number of team leaders on the largest aircraft from four people to three. The union also agreed to recommend its members accept BA's proposals for reducing a £2.1 billion pension deficit and endorsed the contentious sick leave policy after management said it would be implemented fairly.

Prior to the agreement, BA had cancelled 1,300 flights for Tuesday and Wednesday. The airline said that the agreement had come too late to prevent disruption to "tens of thousands" of passengers. Willie Walsh, the BA chief executive, supported the TGWU for working with it to avert industrial action now and in the future, stating, "We are pleased that our negotiations with the T&G have resulted in an agreement that removes the threat of strikes."

Tony Woodley, TGWU general secretary, said that the union apologised for "an unfortunate dispute." He added that the TGWU would seek to work closer with the company in future and called on the union's members to accept the agreement. "It is time for the company and cabin crews to make a fresh start. The agreement on the table will not be bettered. It is time to get back to normal."

College lecturers in Northern Ireland continue action in pay dispute

On January 30, college lecturers in Northern Ireland held their sixth one-day strike since May of last year in an ongoing pay dispute.

The lecturers are members of the UCU and NASUWT trade unions. They are demanding pay parity with school teachers. According to lecturers' unions, they are paid £3,421 per annum less than most schoolteachers for doing similar work.

As part of the campaign, lecturers are also staging a work to rule, affecting the administration and preparation for mergers between colleges due to take effect next August.

The dispute originated in 2001, when employers agreed to establish pay parity with teachers but did not implement it. The government then took control over lecturers' pay and imposed a cap on public sector pay. In relation to the lecturers' dispute, the government claims to accept the principle of establishing pay parity with teachers but maintains that it would breach its current pay policy.

Speaking of the dispute, the UCU's regional official, Jim McKeown, said, "Our members were encouraged by the secretary of state's support—but there is no cash on the table. Our members had been listening to promises and statements of support for nearly six years, but their pay is falling even further behind that of other teachers. Teachers have had their pay increased by 2.5 percent last September and will get a further 2.5 percent next September whilst lecturers have been offered nothing.

"College lecturers are only asking for fairness—they do a similar job to schoolteachers and deserve the same pay and salary structures. Members are prepared to keep this campaign going until they get that."

Fujitsu workers in Manchester begin five-day strike

On January 30, employees working on outsourced IT contracts at Fujitsu Services in Manchester, England, began a five-day strike in an ongoing dispute over pay, union recognition and redundancy rights.

The Amicus trade union represents about 300 of the 1,000 mostly non-union workers. The stoppage follows a two-day strike held earlier this month.

Amicus said that it was holding to industrial action in order to force the company to return to negotiations. The union suspended industrial action in December to attend talks with the company and the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service.

Fujitsu Services handles work for several large companies and institutions, including the retailer Marks & Spencer and the Home Office. It employs about 12,000 in the UK at a number of locations, including Crewe, Sheffield, South Wales and the Thames Valley.

Africa

Union opposes bus strike in Durban, South Africa

The South African transport union, SATAWU, has been attempting to persuade its members to call off an unofficial strike by bus drivers in Durban on the grounds that they may

face contempt of court proceedings.

The position of the other union involved, the Transport and Allied Workers' Union (Tawu), has not been made public.

The strike was called after the bus company Remant Alton failed to declare a dividend on its shares, 30 percent of which are owned by the workforce. The workers decided to launch an unofficial strike after the company went to the courts and obtained a ruling preventing them from marching to the city hall to hand in a list of their demands.

Bus workers are also on strike in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, over sick leave. The 600 Metrobus employees had been told previously that they would be employed on the same terms and conditions after transferring from the previous publicly owned service. However, the company now wants to do away with the workers' right to accumulate an entitlement to sick leave.

South African platinum miners strike to oppose seven-day week

Around 3,000 miners (out of a total workforce of 5,000) at the Modikwa platinum mine in Limpopo, South Africa, have been on strike since January 26. They are currently forced to work seven days a week without a break and are having extra shifts imposed on them. They are also demanding increases in their transport subsidies and opposing the pay difference between black and white staff.

NUM Regional Coordinator Onis Serothwane said that racial discrimination was a big problem at the mine, and had been a factor in sparking the strike.

There have been reports that the union and management have reached a compromise on the issues of transport subsidies and the differences in pay, but have not yet resolved the issue of the seven-day working week.

Nuclear industry workers in South Africa march to demand compensation

Workers in the South African nuclear industry marched to their employer's head offices in Pretoria on January 24 to demand compensation for illnesses caused by radiation. The workers are employed by Nuclear Energy Corporation of South Africa (NECSA). They have suffered numerous illnesses during the last two years, including cancer and asthma.



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