Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

9 March 2007

Europe

National Health Service employees demonstrate throughout UK

On March 3 thousands of health workers protested in many cities and towns in the UK to oppose cuts in jobs and services and the impact of private sector involvement on the National Health Service. The protests were also in opposition to below-inflation pay increases.

The demonstrations were called as part of a day of action by NHS Together, an alliance of trade unions, professional associations and other staff organisations. The Unison trade union is one of the central organisations involved.

Demonstrations were held in London, Manchester, Preston, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield, Bristol, Winchester, Sunderland, Cambridge, Belfast and other towns and cities.

In Manchester several hundred protesters participated in the demonstration, marching through the city centre before attending a rally. Many of the protesters were mental health workers, who recently held a strike to protest at cuts in jobs and services.

Dr. Peter Carter, of the Royal College of Nursing, speaking to the BBC, said nurses were "angry and upset" over the constant cuts being carried out in the NHS. "Over the last year or so nurses have seen jobs frozen, redundancies, services closed, wards closed, student nurses not being able to get jobs on finishing their training, which is a pretty depressing state of affairs.

"And then you've had on Thursday the announcement by the government that they were not going to fully implement the recommendations of the pay review body that nurses should get 2.5 percent. And so it's a combination of both of these things that have led to an extremely frustrated nursing workforce."

According to one survey this week cut in services were being implemented in three-quarters of all National Health Service trusts.

Signal workers in Scotland strike over shift patterns

On March 7 more than 400 signal workers employed by Network Rail in Scotland began a two day strike over proposed changes to shift patterns. The stoppage led to disruption throughout the network in Scotland, with many services cancelled and others operating on a reduced timetable. Thousands of commuters were affected.

The action is the first railway strike in Scotland four years and is centred on the implementation of shift patterns in a 35 hour week agreed by Network Rail and the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) last July.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow accused management of undermining safety by employing managers to run signal boxes during the strike. Crow said, "The few trains that have run in Scotland today have done so with the help of inadequately trained managers, some of whom have been shipped in from as far afield as Lincolnshire and Kent and put in charge of signal boxes with just a few hours' training."

This week the union threatened to ballot its members in England and Wales if the dispute in was not resolved shortly.

Tugboat workers in Rotterdam, Holland strike

Tugboat workers employed by the port services group Smit in Rotterdam, Holland began a 24 hour strike on March 6 in a dispute over pay. About 240 workers are involved in the strike and are members of the FNV Bondgenoten trade union. The action was the third in an ongoing dispute.

The union said that it had called the stoppage following an "earth-shattering silence" from the company's management in the dispute. On March 7 the strikers voted to continue their strike into a second day.

Tax officials in Holland strike in pay dispute

Dutch tax officials staged a strike action on March 5 in a pay dispute. The stoppage led to the closure of tax offices in Rotterdam, Nijmegen, Arnhem and Gorinchem. Trade unions representing tax workers are calling for a pay increase of a 2.5 percent.

The strike will result in delays for tax payers filing their income tax returns. In Holland tax returns must be filed by April.

Disabled workers in Cardiff, Wales protest plans to close factories

On March 3, disabled workers employed by Remploy held a march and rally in Cardiff, Wales, to protest plans to close their factories.

Some 300 people marched through the city centre to draw attention to a government review of Remploy factories. Remploy is the largest employer of disabled workers in Britain, with 5,000 disabled staff employed at 83 sites across the UK, including 12 factories in Wales. It is currently reviewing its operations following a government directive to develop a modernisation plan. According to the BBC, the government wanted Remploy to "significantly increase the number of disabled people they employed while staying within the funding of £555 million over five years"

Last week, Remploy said of the plans, "The core issue is that each job in our factories costs an average of £19,000 a year. For the same money, we can find four jobs for disabled people in mainstream employment."

On February 24 Remploy workers organised in several trade unions participated in a rally, in Sheffield, South Yorkshire as part of a national day of action to oppose the possible closure of Remploy factories.

Middle East

Turkish health workers protest

Health Workers in Turkey began a series of demonstrations and protests this week to oppose cuts in the health services and the privatisation of health care. According the BIA News Centre, several organisations took part in demonstrations on March 1. These are the Emine OZCAN BIA (Istanbul), Turkey's Physicians Association (TTB), Health and Social Services Workers Union (SES), Turkey's Association of Dentists (TDB), Revolutionary Health Workers Union (Dev Saglik Is) and Istanbul Chamber of Pharmacists (IEO)

Protesters demanded that the government reverse plans to close district clinics. Other demands are that a pilot application of family medicine should cover all the country, the opening of new District clinics and stronger employment rights for newly qualified medical staff.

The chairman of Turkey's Physicians Association said this week, "We constantly stated our objection to government's plans to transform the

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health sector. This is a World Bank inflicted policy which aims at introducing market forces into the sector, disregarding the social aspect of the services."

Further demonstrations will be held throughout March, including a partial strike on March 14.

Israeli trade union federation threatens strike over wages

On March 6, Histadrut Chairman Ofer Eini announced that the union federation would hold a public sector strike in two weeks unless progress is made on the dispute over delays in the payment of wages to 5,000 workers of local authorities and religious councils. The strike would begin March 21

Last week Eini cancelled a planned strike to allow Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to work towards resolving the crisis. According to the Haaretz news service, 33 local authorities and 18 religious councils have delayed wage payments to 5,000 workers. At a cabinet meeting on the subject, ministers heard that the current debt stands at NIS 76 million, about NIS 15,000 per worker. According to Eini, in some authorities, "workers have not been paid their salaries for half a year or even 10 months."

Iranian teachers protest outside Parliament

On March 6, thousands of teachers protested outside the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) in Tehran. This was the second teacher's protest in a week, following a mass rally thought to number 10,000 to 15,000 on March 3. There were similar protests, in smaller concentrations, in other provinces across the country.

Demonstrators used various slogans, including: "Schools will be shut down as of tomorrow" and "Incompetent Minister, resign, resign." The teachers were carrying red cards and demanded the resignation of Minister of Education Farshidi.

According to interviews conducted by the official Iranian Labour News Agency (ILNA) about 98 percent of retired teachers live below the poverty line. Most teachers have second or third jobs because they cannot afford to live on their current salaries. The poverty line for a family of five is now around 600,000 toomans per month. Currently, an elementary school teacher with many years of experience, and on the brink of retirement, makes an average monthly salary of 240,000 to 340,000. Over 100,000 adjunct teachers receive only 140,000 to 160,000 toomans. They are not eligible for health insurance and most social security benefits, and do not get paid for the three months of summer.

The protesting teachers have vowed that if their demands are not met they will shut down schools as of March 11.

UAE workers block road in daily wage increase protest

According to Gulf News, over 400 labourers stopped rush hour traffic coming into Dubai on Shaikh Zayed Road, February 28, to demand a wage increase. According to the *Khaleej Times*, this triggered a major traffic backlog.

The labourers, many of whom are migrant workers from the Indian sub-continent, stopped work for around two hours at their work site near the fifth interchange. They were demanding a Dh2 increase in their Dh25 daily wages. The workers claimed they were drawing a salary of Dh500 per month which was not enough to meet their expenses. Even this salary was often delayed. They also alleged that the labour camp they were living in was cramped.

Africa

Zambian copper miners strike to demand pay rise

Miners at the Luanshya Copper Mine (LCM) in Zambia have been on strike since March 1 to demand a pay rise.

Dereck Webbstock, LCM's chief executive officer, told Reuters that the company has been losing 65 tonnes in finished copper a day since the strike began. He claimed that the miners were violating Zambia's labour laws by striking before negotiations were completed.

Reuters has reported that the strike of miners at the Mopani Copper Mines, the second largest copper producer in Zambia, has been called off. Miners took action last week for a 40 percent wage increase, after having rejected a management offer of 14 percent.

Management secured the ending of the strike after making assurances that they "would show flexibility in wage talks." Sikufele Mundia, the head of the National Union of Mining and Allied Workers, told Reuters, "We have been given the mandate by workers to resume the negotiations . . These negotiations can take even 10 months but we want to conclude as quickly as possible."

Mopani is a joint venture of Swiss firm Glencore International AG and Canada's First Quantum Minerals Ltd.

Bakery workers take national strike action in South Africa

Around 2,000 members of the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) began a strike throughout South Africa on March 5, demanding the formation of a central bargaining forum, which would allow benefits to be negotiated on a national basis.

The bakery workers, who are employed by Blue Ribbon Bakery, have been involved in strikes and demonstrations in Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria, Bloemfontein, Mafikeng, Vereeniging and Potchesfstroom.

Premier Foods, the parent company, is South Africa's biggest black-owned enterprise. It has 14 plants in different parts of the country. In 1997, it used declining union membership to justify terminating the previous bargaining arrangement with FAWU. The union appealed to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration, and obtained an advisory award in its favour, which management rejected.

South African strikers deny accusations of shooting company manager

The South African bus company, Autopax, has accused striking members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) of intimidating employees and passengers and shooting one of the company's managers during pickets at the Johannesburg Park Station last week. According to *IOL*, the company, a division of Transnet, has suspended all remaining Translux and City to City bus services countrywide.

SATAWU's Ronnie Mamba denied the accusations of violence and intimidation, insisting that the Autopax manager was not shot by Satawu members or sympathisers. "We think this is twisted campaign to discredit the union and to gain some public sympathy," he said. The strike is in protest against the imposition of a four percent wage increase without consultation, poor working conditions and the introduction of a new pay system where only one of two drivers on long-distance routes would be paid. Half of the Autopax workforce belongs to SATAWU and the union claims that non-members have also joined the action.

Ugandan lecturers take strike action

Lecturers at Gulu University, Uganda, have been on strike since March 1. They are demanding payment of arrears of their salary enhancements. They are also protesting the failure of the university to remit the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) contributions and Pay As You Earn (PAYE) to the Uganda Revenue Authority.

According to the *New Vision*, some students have said that they would join the strike if the lecturers did not resume lecturing this week. Chairman of Gulu University Academic Staff Association, James Nicholas Odiya, told the paper that the lecturers' salaries had not been increased, despite the government having released funds in 2005 and 2006 specifically for the enhancement of the salaries of lecturers at the university.

He demanded that the university formulate a schedule for remitting NSSF contributions and PAYE. The *New Vision* reported that the Uganda Revenue Authority froze the university's accounts last week, because of arrears of tax remittances.

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