

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

13 April 2007

Europe

Irish Nurses strike over pay and conditions

Nurses in the Republic of Ireland staged a one-hour strike on April 11 in a dispute over pay and conditions. The 40,000 nurses involved are members of the Irish Nurses Organisation and the Psychiatric Nurses' Association.

Picket lines were set up at hospitals that included St Vincent's University Hospital in Dublin, South Tipperary General Hospital in Clonmenl and the South Tipperary Mental Health services.

Nurses are calling for a 10 percent pay increase and a shorter working week as a step towards the implementation of a 35 hour week, to bring them into line with other healthcare professionals.

A representative of the union said, "Nurses are one of the lowest paid groups of employees in the health service. They provide a comprehensive and professional service, for which they require a third level qualification but yet are among the lowest paid. The majority of healthcare professionals work a 35-hour week and the same should apply to the nursing profession."

The nurses have been involved in a work to rule since the beginning of April, following the breakdown of talks between the trade unions and Health Service Executive management. Nurses have refused to undertake administrative duties, answer telephones or attend meetings. This week the unions stated that further strikes may take place pending the resolution of the dispute.

Postal staff in St Petersburg, Russia protest

On April 9, Russian postal staff demonstrated outside the offices of the Federal Postal Agency of St Petersburg to demand a pay increase, union recognition and the introduction of new technology.

The postal workers established a new union last month and claim 230 members. The union is calling for a 30 percent pay increase and has threatened to strike if its demands are not met.

Cleaners and catering staff at Welsh hospital protest cut in working hours

On April 10 cleaners and catering staff at the Neath Port

Talbot Hospital in Wales began a 24-hour strike to protest a cut in working hours. The 140 workers are contracted to OCS Ltd and are organised by the public sector Unison trade union.

Senior personnel carried out cleaning and catering services in an attempt to break the strike. The union claims that OCS plans to cut its members combined working hours at the hospital each week from 2,770 to 2,555. In response, the union cited the report of an independent assessor recommending that weekly hours needed to keep the hospital clean should be increased to 2,968 hours.

Grampian Foods staff in Scotland set to strike

Workers at Grampian Foods in Scotland are set to strike this week following a breakdown in negotiations between the Transport and General Workers Union and management. The workers are in dispute over pay, pensions and the casualisation of the workforce. Nearly 1,000 employees are involved in the dispute.

The union called off a planned strike two weeks ago in order to continue negotiations with the firm, following a vote to strike by staff in Scotland, Wales and southern England. This week the union confirmed that talks had broken down and announced that workers at Cambuslang near Glasgow, Coupar Angus in Perthshire and Fairview near Edinburgh would strike on April 12.

National Union of Teachers members support strike ballot in the UK

This week members of the National Union of Teachers in the UK supported a proposal to hold a ballot for industrial action. Teachers are protesting plans by Chancellor Gordon Brown to impose a two percent pay settlement on public sector workers.

At the union's annual conference, many delegates condemned the plans stating that the proposed deal represented a pay cut. The NUT organises 260,000 teachers throughout the UK. Teachers in Britain have not struck over pay in more than 40 years.

Africa

Medical workers demonstrate against non-payment of wages in Cameroon

Temporary medical workers from hospitals around Yaounde, Cameroon, demonstrated at the Star Building, and took it over for a number of hours on April 2, according to *The Post* (based in Buea, Cameroon). They are demanding to be given permanent posts and to be paid 13 months of salary arrears.

The demonstrators gathered in front of the prime minister's office promising to strike indefinitely if their demands were not met.

There is only one nurse per thousand people in Cameroon. A hospital official said, "We have [such] a lot of work that we might not be able to attend to all patients ... I'm afraid our patients will suffer; we don't have nurses now. Indeed, the hospital is depending a lot on the services of these temporary workers."

Many doctors and nurses have emigrated to Europe and the United States to find better pay and conditions.

Ghanaian workers demonstrate over pension fund

Postal workers in Ghana have been protesting since December 2006 over a shortfall of 12 billion cedis (US \$1.3 million) in the pension fund, known as the Provident Fund. At a protest held on April 3, workers sang war songs and called for the removal of the General Manager of Ghana Post, Kofi Adu-Adonteng.

"We have made several calls on management to account for our money but our calls have not been heeded to. Persistent calls for the auditing of the provident fund have been sabotaged by management," an employee of Ghana Post told *The Independent*, based in Ghana.

Workers have also accused Ghana Post managers of not paying their Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT) contributions for the last two years. One postal worker explained, "Many retired workers have had their SSNIT benefits withheld due to the failure of management to pay their SSNIT contributions."

General Manager of Ghana Post in-charge of Corporate Communications, K.A. Otuo-Achearnpong, told *The Independent* that "the workers have no case." He claimed that the money from the Provident Fund had been invested into the expansion and operations of Ghana Post and that the workers were consulted before it was used. He added that management has pleaded with workers for time to pay back the 12 billion cedis into the fund.

South African bakery strike set to spread

Around 2,000 South African bakery workers, belonging to the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU), have been on strike since March 5 to demand the setting up of a national bargaining forum for bakeries owned by Premier Foods. The action includes both contract and permanent employees in the baking and milling divisions, responsible for the manufacturing products such as Iwisa maize meal and

Snowflake flour.

FAWU General Secretary Katishi Masemola has announced that following an unsuccessful meeting with Premier Foods in Cape Town, the union plans to step up the dispute to include another 1,500 workers.

FAWU has condemned the police and security personnel for "heavy-handed tactics such as unleashing dogs and pulling out firearms without provocation." Masemola said that marches would be held in Johannesburg and Cape Town to protest the methods used against the strikers.

South African bus drivers return to work, some may be disciplined

Bus drivers employed by the South Africa's Metrobus returned to work on April 4 after a bitter two-month strike. The action, which began on January 19, was over pay and conditions and to protest the dismissal of three shop stewards and 19 other workers.

The South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU) and the Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union both signed an agreement that failed to resolve the outstanding issues.

When Metrobus took over the company, the workforce had been assured that working conditions would not change. Under the old agreement, laid down in 1999 by the previous owners, the old City of Johannesburg employees who had more than 15 years service could cash in their accumulated sick-leave days. That has now been reinstated for employees who qualified for it before 2005, but only until October of this year. After that workers who refused to accept the new conditions will be sacked.

Whilst the 19 employees have been reinstated there is no guarantee that they will not face future disciplinary action, and the three shop stewards have been given final written warnings.

SAMWU's Johannesburg branch chairperson, Moatlhodi Mongale, was quoted as stating that the union was "happy with the agreement and the outcome and want to congratulate the city manager for providing leadership when he was required to do so."



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