

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

28 September 2007

Europe

Bulgarian teachers strike shuts schools nationwide

Thousands of Bulgarian teachers began an indefinite strike on September 24 in a pay dispute. The teachers are demanding a doubling of their wages and last week rejected a 32 percent pay increase from the education ministry.

The stoppage resulted in the closure of schools and kindergartens nationwide and children being sent home. By September 26, the third day of the action, four in five schools and kindergartens were closed according to the central strike committee. The committee said that up to 80 percent of Bulgarian teachers were involved. A demonstration was held yesterday by teachers in Sofia, the capital city.

Classroom assistants strike in Northern Ireland

Classroom assistants in Northern Ireland began a one-day strike on September 26 in a dispute over salaries and pay grades. The strike involves up to 7,000 workers who set up picket lines at a number of schools, including special schools.

During the stoppage most special schools were forced to close, along with many others. A march and rally was also held in Belfast city centre by staff and their supporters.

Five trade unions are involved in the dispute, with the main trade union being the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA). Prior to the strike the unions and the five education boards involved met at the government headquarters, Stormont, but were unable to reach agreement. The education boards are proposing to calculate the pro-rata hourly rate based on a full-time 36-hour week. This had previously been calculated out on a 32.5-hour week.

Mental health workers in Manchester, England continue strike

On September 27, hundreds of mental health workers in Manchester, England staged industrial action for the third time to protest the suspension of a shop steward.

Staff held a two-day strike affecting all patient, hospital and community psychiatric services throughout the city. During the action staff picketed North Manchester General Hospital, Manchester Royal Infirmary, and Wythenshawe Hospital and lobbied the local NHS Trust.

In June, Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust suspended Karen Reissmann, a psychiatric nurse with more than 25 years in the profession, for allegedly bringing the trust into disrepute and misusing her time as a community psychiatric nurse. Reissman maintains she was suspended for consistently opposing cuts in social services and mental health care in Manchester.

Africa

Egyptian textile workers occupy factory

On September 25, up to 27,000 workers occupied the Misr Helwan Spinning and Weaving Company's factory in Mahalla al-Kubra in an ongoing dispute over wages and working conditions. The plant is one of the largest state-owned textile factories in Egypt.

The workers are also demanding that the head of the company, Mohib Salah al-Din, is dismissed and the release of five of their representatives detained by police on September 24. The industrial action began on September 23.

The dispute stems from December last year when strike action resulted in the government agreeing to the workers' demand for annual bonuses equivalent to 45 days wages. Since then the government has not fulfilled the agreement despite announcing profits of 217 million Egyptian pounds (US\$39 million) for the last financial year.

The striking workers also demanded the dismissal of the representatives of the government-approved labour union who visited them at the start of the action. The following day the public prosecutor ordered the arrest of five of the workers' representatives on charges that they incited strike action, holding an unlawful gathering and the destruction of public property.

Striking civil servants sacked in Nigeria

Civil servants in the Nigerian state of Oyo have been sacked after they went on strike. The 34,000 workers went on strike because the state government has refused to pay them the minimum wage of N9,400 (US\$75) per month.

They initially went on strike in June and returned to work after the government promised to pay them the minimum wage. But the government only paid higher grades the minimum wage and the workers began their strike again.

Workers say that they have been subjected to threats from thugs hired by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Oyo. A group of 15,000 civil servants gathered outside the union's headquarters in Agodi chanting anti-government slogans.

Traditional rulers have met with the state governor, Adebayo Alao-Akala, in an attempt to negotiate a settlement.

Construction workers locked out in South Africa

Workers building the Green Point Stadium for the 2010 World Cup have been locked out by their employers, Murray & Roberts and WBHO (Pty) Ltd. The employers' action follows a strike over transport to the site.

"We have to catch buses near the site," a worker identified as Patrick told reporters. "It's the same as walking here; nothing has changed. We wanted money at first and they gave us buses instead. Some of us live in Khayelitsha and Nyanga, which is far."

The 1,500 workers went on strike twice in August over the same question. The issue blew up again on September 21. On-site project director Andrew Fanton warned that if the workers did not return to work they could face disciplinary action and dismissal. "It's definitely having a negative impact," he said.

Speaking for the National Union of Mineworkers, regional organiser Susan Deers criticised the company for negotiating in bad faith.

"This is not merely about a travel allowance, it's transport in general. The issue is the pick-up points. The workers want to be picked up at the Cape Town station, taken to Green Point and back, but the pick-up is somewhere in Buitengracht, which is eight minutes from the station," said Deers.

The employers promised to provide transport from new pick-up points on September 24, but none

appeared. When the workers threatened further action the employers issued a formal lockout notice.



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