

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

5 October 2007

Europe

Classroom assistants stage walkout in Northern Ireland

Around 3,000 classroom assistants staged the first day of a three-day walkout on Tuesday, October 2, after talks between the public service union, Nipsa, and the Education and Library Boards broke down.

Classroom assistants voted 93 percent in favour of strike action on September 26 in response to a series of proposed cuts in pay and conditions by the Direct Rule Ministers and Northern Ireland Assembly.

Special schools across the province closed while pupils at mainstream schools with special needs also had to remain at home. If no agreement can be achieved, the classroom assistants have said they will only return to work on Friday before beginning all-out action on Monday.

Teachers' protest in Bulgaria

Teachers rallied in Independence Square in Bulgaria's capital, Sofia, on October 2 as part of their campaign for pay increases.

According to reports, there was widespread anger at the intervention of the World Bank, which had appealed to the government not to increase teachers' salaries as it would cause "financial chaos."

Scotland: College staff strike over involvement of private agency

On October 1, the BBC reported that lecturing staff at Telford College in Edinburgh are taking part in a series of two-day strikes over plans to use a private agency, "Protocol National," to employ temporary lecturers and support workers. The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Scotland's largest teaching union, said most of the college's 328 lecturers were taking part.

The lecturers have voted to strike for two days every week until the situation is resolved. Staff staged an initial one-day walkout on September 27. The union

claimed there had been no meaningful consultation on a change that would have major implications for the employment terms, conditions and pay of those affected, and create a two-tier workforce among the lecturing staff.

UK postal workers stage 48-hour strike

Britain's 130,000 postal workers began a 48-hour walkout at lunchtime on Thursday, October 4. A second 48-hour strike is to be held on October 8.

The strike is in response to Royal Mail's restructuring of the postal service and a below-inflation 2.5 percent pay offer. Industrial action will cover all duties, scheduled attendance and overtime of every postal worker for two 48-hour periods.

Middle East

More strikes in Egypt as textile workers win demands

The Egyptian government has agreed to meet the demands of some 27,000 workers at the Misr Helwan Spinning and Weaving Company's factory in Mahalla al-Kubra after five days of a sit-in strike protest. Government officials agreed to pay the three months of bonuses that were in dispute.

Thousands of workers had gathered for the strike, beating plastic barrels like drums and shouting slogans. Workers complained of increased prices of basic foods— inflation has reached 12 percent since last December, when the Mahalla workers previously took strike action. One worker who had been at the factory for 10 years showed his pay slip of 242 Egyptian pounds (US\$43) for a month's work and explained that he could only survive by taking a second job.

At least two other strikes took place last week, again with the government quickly acceding to demands. One of them was at the Damietta Spinning and Weaving Company, settled after 24 hours. The other was at the Tanta Linseed and Oil factory where more than 600

workers held a sit-in over unpaid allowances and incentives.

There has been a spate of strikes over the last year, the biggest number since the 1950s. More than 200 labour disputes took place in 2006.

The World Bank has ranked Egypt as the world's most improved economy for investors in 2007, with the government implementing a wide range of free-market measures to attract investors. Direct foreign investment is expected to rise from US\$2 billion in 2004 to US\$11 billion this year. While a small elite are benefiting from this economic expansion, the vast majority are paid starvation wages.

Commentators are suggesting that the government has made concessions to the strikers to prevent growing instability in the country as the aged President Mubarak is expected soon to be replaced, most probably by his son Gamal. There has been a crackdown on journalists and opposition politicians over the last months. One prominent editor was put on trial just for raising questions about Mubarak's health. Hundreds of members of the Muslim Brotherhood have been jailed, and its top leaders are on military trial for alleged money-laundering and terrorist charges.

Africa

Local government workers on strike in South Africa

Local government workers in Johannesburg belonging to the South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) held a two-day strike on October 1. The strike was in protest at the increasing use of casual labour, the multiple pay scales for similar jobs, and the replacement of yearly pay increases with performance-based pay. The workers are also demanding the reinstatement of free travel on local buses when traveling to and from work.

An attempt by the City of Johannesburg to stop the strike through the courts failed, after the court ruled that the authority had not given sufficient notice of its call for an interdict.

Samwu said that the strike had received solid support from its members, with only skeleton staff in essential services left on the job. Around 2,000 people marched through the city centre on the first day of the strike.

South African rail link workers return to work after courts intervene

Workers on the Gautrain high-speed rail link in South

Africa have been forced to return to work after a court ruling that their strike was illegal. The workers went out on strike on September 26 to demand a wage increase.

They returned to work on September 28 after the employers, Bombela CJV, obtained a court order that would have left any striker that did otherwise open to dismissal. There was no comment from the workers' union, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).



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