

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

12 October 2007

Europe

UK prison staff threatened with strike ban

Following Justice Secretary Jack Straw's recent announcement that he is "actively considering" banning strikes in the prison service, prison officers have called for urgent meetings with ministers.

According to a BBC report, the leader of the Prison Officers Association (POA), Colin Moses, said the plan would "criminalize" his members.

Straw's comments, made in the House of Commons on October 9, follow the first national 24-hour strike by prison officers in August.

The government accused the POA of renegeing on a voluntary no-strike agreement reached in 2005 after Labour rescinded a legal ban on strikes in the prison service brought in by the Conservatives. But the union gave notice in May this year that it no longer wished to be bound by the agreement reached.

Moses said, "This is a disgraceful act by a Labour government who promised to remove anti-trade union legislation whilst in opposition. Yet now they are looking to reintroduce legislation that will criminalise POA members for trying to exercise their human rights as workers."

The POA strike in August resulted from a government decision to spread the officers' independently assessed pay award over two years.

BBC could face strikes after proposed job cuts

According to the *Guardian* newspaper, the BBC is "braced for a fresh wave of strike action as its director general Mark Thompson, reeling from a series of revelations that have corroded viewer trust, prepares to announce up to 3,000 job cuts."

Union leaders met the BBC Trust chairman, Sir Michael Lyons, and warned him that industrial action in the run-up to Christmas was "inevitable" if the BBC pressed ahead with plans to cut thousands of jobs in an effort to plug a £2 billion "black hole" between its stated ambitions and

its below-inflation licence fee settlement from the government.

The *Guardian* states that the news and factual divisions are expected to bear the brunt of the cuts. "As part of Mr. Thompson's strategy to make 'fewer, bigger, better' programmes and to repeat them more often across the BBC, he will also look to shave around £100m a year from the cost of original productions."

Classroom assistants take protest to Northern Ireland parliament building

Over a hundred striking classroom assistants in Northern Ireland have picketed Stormont, the parliament building, as part of their dispute for better pay and conditions and the against the re-grading of posts. Members of the public service union NIPSA from east and south Belfast gathered outside Stormont on October 9. The strike by 3,000 classroom workers has closed 27 of Northern Ireland's 45 special schools. Education Minister Caitriona Ruane called for an end to the demonstration after the latest offer from employers was rejected. One of the strikers, Cathy Walker, from Mitchell House special needs school in east Belfast, was interviewed in the *Irish Examiner*. She had been driven to protest by years of being underpaid. "We don't want to be out here, we care for the children. It is because we have cared for them that this has gone on for so long," she said. "The Department of Education has left us with no other option but to strike. We are standing strong and we are not going to back down until we get what we consider a fair offer." Indefinite strike action began October 8 following a one-day demonstration last month.

Middle East

Israeli secondary school teachers plan to strike

The Secondary School Teachers Association (SSTA) began an open-ended strike October 10 in high schools and junior high schools in the Jewish school system.

From October 17, teachers at Arab schools are set to join the strike, which the association has said could last

for months. The SSTM leadership has rejected a compromise by Education Minister Yuli Tamir, and no new meetings have been set. "These days have to be allowed to pass," Tamir said. "There will be a few days of strike and then talks will resume."

SSTM Chairman Ran Erez said that "we would like the strike to be as short as possible, but in light of the lack of sensitivity of the government and the statements by the Finance Ministry, we are preparing for a strike lasting months." According to the proposal put forward by Tamir, some of the SSTM teachers would receive special pay increases, such as for projects related to Israel's 60th anniversary, extra teaching ahead of matriculation exams and students' entry into the army and other special projects. The rest of the teachers would receive an immediate 11 percent pay rise, which would include the recent 5 percent pay increase to members of the Histadrut Labor Federation. Erez said, "We do not accept that only special individuals receive pay hikes, which would in any case last only for one year. Our goal is that all the teachers receive the raises. This is a worse proposal than no raise at all."

He added that including the 5 percent Histadrut pay increase only continued the pay gap between college graduates in the civil service and teachers. Erez noted that the 15 percent raise the SSTM is seeking would cost about NIS 900 million, while the Education Ministry proposal is for no more than NIS 200 million to 250 million.

Africa

School teachers on strike in Burundi

Secondary school teachers in Burundi, belonging to the National Council for Teachers of the Secondary Schools (CONAPES), have taken all-out strike action. They are protesting against the government's failure to implement a salary agreement signed in 2002.

The vast majority of schools in the public sector responded to the strike call. The action may widen on October 16 to include primary school teachers and secondary school teachers belonging to other unions, unless the government takes action before that date.

The intention of the agreement was to give the same pay to those with the same educational level, without regard to the sector of the civil service in which they worked. *AllAfrica.com* pointed out that the teachers' strike may be a precursor to more strikes by other sections of the civil service, who are affected by the same issue.

Workers at South African ice cream plant strike over pay

Around 500 workers have taken strike action at the ice

cream and fruit sorbet processing plant owned by Dynamic Commodities in the Coega Industrial Development Zone (IDZ), South Africa. The workers belong to the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU). The union is demanding an increase of 12 percent, but management has offered only 6 percent.

Management responded to the strike by locking the gates of the plant, although they denied that their actions constituted a lockout.

While management claims that the workers are on short time, the workers say they are working from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., without getting any overtime pay. Their hourly pay is only R6.34 (US \$0.93). The workers complain of harassment by management and, in addition to a pay rise, are also demanding free transport to and from work.

Thousands of Egyptian garbage collectors in sit-in protest

Around 3,000 garbage collectors in the eastern part of Shubra el-Kheima, Cairo, Egypt took part in a sit-in outside the district headquarters. The action was in protest against the non-payment of salaries since June.

The demonstrators, employed by al-Ikhlas, claim that the decision to cease paying wages was made by Major General Fawzi el-Shami, head of the local council. He also imposed punitive deductions of pay on the workers that are up to twice as much as their salaries. During the sit-in the workers shouted slogans such as "No more injustice" and "Save us from the head of the local council." State Security forces moved in, driving four big loaders in an attempt to break up the protest. One of them collided with a van belonging to a protester.

The council has outsourced garbage collection to three companies, al-Ikhlas, al-Dawlia and al-Roda. One of the demonstrators told *Ocnus.net* that Dawlia and Roda are "deeply influenced by the head of the council" and that no sanctions had been taken against them even though many householders are dissatisfied with them.

The protest was dispersed after the state security forces intervened. But the workers threatened to stage a new sit-in if their demands are not met.



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