

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

2 November 2007

## Europe

### Two million public sector workers strike in Italy

Public sector employees in Italy staged an eight-hour strike on October 26 to protest cuts in funding for future contracts in the 2008 budget of Prime Minister Romano Prodi's coalition government.

According to Italian news agencies up to 2 million public sector employees stopped work. The action was called by the main trade union federations and involved many workers in the state sector including those at government offices, state museums, fire stations, waste disposal departments and hospitals. During the day an estimated 100,000 people gathered in the Piazza Repubblica in the capital Rome to protest.

Trade unions estimate that the 2008 budget will see a €5.12 billion (US\$7.27 billion) cut in terms of what is required to cover the contract renewals. The budget was approved by the cabinet last month and is to be voted on by parliament by the end of the year.

### Italian metalworkers stage 24-hour strike

Italian metalworkers staged a one-day strike on October 30 in a dispute over the renewal of their collective contract. One of the main companies hit by the action was the auto manufacturer Fiat SpA. By 5 p.m. a reported one in three of Fiat staff had taken industrial action.

### Air France cabin crew strike for five days in contract dispute

Cabin crew staff at Air France took strike action from October 25 to 29 in a dispute over their collective contract, due to end this year.

The action was organised by trade unions representing more than 60 percent of Air France flight attendants, and more than three-quarters of Air France's 15,000 flight staff participated. The strike led to cancellations and delays to between 30 and 40 percent of flights during the busy school half-term holidays. These affected mainly domestic flights but also hit some long-haul flights and international connections as well.

On October 30, Air France announced that it had lost an estimated €60 million (US\$86 million) due to the industrial action. The company said it plans to take legal action against unions and is seeking a total of €45 million (US\$65 million) in compensation for its losses. Air France is part of the Air France KLM group with the French state holding around 18 percent of the share capital.

### England: Midland Mainline staff walk off job in dispute over pensions

On November 1 train drivers employed by Midland Mainline in England struck for 24 hours in a dispute over their pension plan. The workers are member of the Aslef trade union and the action is the second of six planned strike days. During the strike trains did not run from stations in Leeds, Wakefield Westgate, Sheffield, Luton, Chesterfield or Nottingham.

The dispute originates from disagreements over pension provision following a pay deal agreed in 2001. Further strike action is set to be held on the following four Thursdays.

## Middle East

### Dubai construction workers strike

Thousands of immigrant workers on construction sites in Dubai took strike action over pay and conditions last weekend. The Gulf state's construction boom is heavily reliant on South Asian labourers who—faced with the threat of deportation—are extremely exploited and poorly paid.

But over the weekend, thousands of workers defied the deportation threat and staged protests at a labour camp in the Jebel Ali Industrial Zone and a building site in the Al Qusais neighbourhood. They demanded pay increases and better housing and transportation. The BBC reported that during the protests, workers blocked roads and threw stones at police.

The government condemned the strike and threatened to deport anyone involved in damaging private property. A

reported 4,000 South Asian workers who were imprisoned during the strike were released on Wednesday, according to India's ambassador to the Emirates. Another 160 strikers, including 90 Indian nationals, are reportedly still held in Dubai's central jail.

### **Israeli union federation threatens general strike to support striking teachers**

The chairman of the Israeli labour federation Histadrut, Ofer Eini, announced October 29 that the continued secondary school teachers' strike would result in a meeting November 4 of the Histadrut leadership to declare a general strike.

According to the *Ha'aretz* newspaper, various sectors such as government offices and local authorities could begin shutting down in 15 days unless the teachers' demands are met. They include a 26 percent maximum pay increase to teachers over a five-year period—of which 15 percent would be payable immediately. The increase is the same as that awarded to the Teachers Union, which represents elementary school teachers.

The National Union of Local Authorities (NULA) has said it may be forced to ask for injunctions against the strike, in order to prepare high school students ready for the winter matriculation exams.

According to Israel News, the National Parents Association has threatened to “paralyse the school system in its entirety”—from kindergartens through to high schools—should injunctions be issued against the teachers.

## **Africa**

### **Burundi nurses on strike to demand pay rise**

Nurses at government hospitals in Burundi are taking indefinite strike action because they have not been given the increases in pay and benefits that they were promised three years ago. The nurses earn only US\$35 per month—only just over the figure identifying absolute poverty.

The nurses have become much busier since the government announced it was offering free health care for young children and expectant mothers.

“The government was lying to us all the time,” said Omar Simpenzwe, the deputy chairman of the nurses' union (SYNAPA).

The government has now promised to give a pay rise of up to 34 percent by next year, but has been told by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to increase its revenues before it does so.

The nurses' strike follows close on the heels of a strike by teachers over their low pay.

### **Senegalese teachers on strike to win promised**

## **benefits**

Teachers at primary and secondary schools in Senegal have taken strike action for three days to demand that the government honors its promises on research and housing allowances.

The teachers belong to an umbrella group of 18 unions. The government signed an agreement with the group in 2003 to provide teachers with a housing allowance, but has since reneged on it.

Until recently, research has been financed from a “special budget” of 7 million FCFA (US\$15.3 million), but the government has not specified whether financing is to be continued. The strikers are demanding that financing for research is made permanent.

“We insist that the research allowance continues and is not a quid pro quo in exchange for longer working hours,” explained Mamadou Diop, general secretary of one of the unions involved, Union Démocratique des Enseignants du Sénégal (UDEN).

This is the fifth time this year that Senegalese teachers have taken strike action for a three-day period.

### **Government sector strikes in Nigeria**

Local government workers in Taraba state, Nigeria went on strike on October 29 to oppose a reduction in their agreed pay rise.

The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) is negotiating with the state government over whether or not it can afford to fund the agreement in full. Jalingo—the state capital of Taraba—has been brought to a standstill by the strike action.

Also in Nigeria, primary school teachers in Delta state belonging to the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) are taking strike action because they have not been included in an agreed 15 percent pay increase.



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