

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

9 November 2007

Europe

French rail and energy workers set for new strikes in November

French rail and energy unions called on October 28 for fresh strike action in November over plans by the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy to curtail the workers' pension rights.

A first strike on October 18 caused transport chaos around the country for several days. Six out of eight unions at state-owned rail operator SNCF, where opposition to the government plans is very strong, called for an unlimited transport strike starting the night of November 13.

Two major unions at the energy firms EDF and GDF backed calls for a one-day strike on November 14, with other unions to reach a decision next week after their ultimatum to the government expires.

Civil servants have also decided on a work stoppage on November 20, over pay and job security. Sarkozy has announced plans to scrap 22,900 civil service jobs in 2008 by not replacing retiring employees, the biggest job cut in the public sector in six years.

The public service employs one in five people in the French labour force.

German train drivers plan 42-hour freight strike

German train drivers will stage a 42-hour strike on freight routes from mid-day November 8, the GDL union said in a statement.

The GDL, which represents 34,000 train drivers, says its members are underpaid compared with counterparts elsewhere in Europe and is seeking an increase of up to 31 percent and an independent collective labour agreement. It has rejected a deal for a 4.5 percent wage rise struck between Deutsche Bahn and two larger rail unions.

GDL chief Manfred Schell said; "If we have no reaction...then from November 12-16, industrial action will be called on all three transport routes—this means urban trains, long-haul trains and freight routes."

A series of stoppages on commuter services has caused major disruption in recent months. The most recent 30-hour strike cost Deutsche Bahn more than 10 million euros (US\$14.6 million), the company said.

Strike threat by Finnish Pharmacies

According to a report by YLE, the Finnish Pharmacists' Association (FPA) issued a strike warning October 30. In the first phase of the strike, on November 15, pharmacists working in the Helsinki region are to stop work. In the second phase, the strike will become national. Most of the members of the FPA work in private pharmacies. In addition to pharmacies, members work in hospitals, in public health clinics, in the pharmaceutical industry,

and at institutions such as the National Agency for Medicines.

UK civil servants strike over privatisation

Around 1,800 PCS members working for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) conducted a one-day strike October 31 in a dispute over the compulsory transfer of 10 staff who worked for the former Department for Education and Skills (DfES) at Caxton House to the private sector.

Two hundred members from the Runcorn branch walked out at mid-day. More than 50 members from Caxton House and Sanctuary Buildings (London Branch) were also on the picket line. Staff picketed outside Caxton House on Tothill St., London, while workers in Sheffield, Darlington and Runcorn also took part in the strike.

The dispute follows the transfer of the 10 support staff who work in the mailroom and security as the DfES splits into two departments and moves across the road to Sanctuary buildings, handing sole occupancy of Caxton House to the Department for Work and Pensions.

All other staff, except for the 10 support workers, will be transferred into the new DCSF or the new DIUS.

Mark Serwotka, PCS general secretary, said, "We had hoped that we could have avoided strike action through talks last week, but the department now seem unwilling to rectify the unjust situation in which these ten people with over 165 years of combined service are in. It is simply wrong that these ten hardworking people should be forcibly transferred to the private sector. If they are going to be transferred then they should be moved to the DWP not a private contractor."

PCS members are also involved in the final stages of voting on further national strike action across the civil service against job cuts, below inflation pay and privatisation. The campaign has already seen two "strongly supported" national one-day strikes this year.

Dublin Bus drivers threaten strike

The *Irish Times* reported November 6 that bus drivers at one of Dublin's biggest depots have threatened to strike from November 11 over what they claim is an attempt by Dublin Bus to "force in" new scheduling.

Drivers at the Harristown depot near Dublin airport said that they are being forced to work longer days to compensate for "mistakes," "incompetence" and "bad planning" by the management in how it schedules buses and the depots that certain routes operate from.

The drivers claimed they were being asked to finish shifts 11 kilometres away from the depots where they would start their shifts. This can add hours to drivers' working week.

The drivers have also accused management of “bullying” tactics and said the company was forcing a strike in the lead-up to Christmas. A Labour Court recommendation issued on October 22 had upheld the company’s position. A spokeswoman for Dublin Bus said the drivers were failing to abide by the ruling.

Russia: Black Sea dockworkers strike over pay

Dockworkers at the Russian Black Sea port of Tuapse went on strike Sunday November 4, one day earlier than planned. Dockers at Tuapse and St. Petersburg ports threatened to go on strike earlier this week if their demand for higher pay was not accepted.

Soferbiy Shalakhov, leader of the Tuapse port worker labour union told *Reuters*, “By decision of the labourer’s conference, the strike is indefinite. The export of dry goods from the port is halted. We will continue to export oil products, and as a consideration of fire and naval security on the oil docks, we have decided not to halt operations.”

Tuapse and St. Petersburg are controlled by Novolipetsk Steel (NLMK), Russia’s fourth-largest steelmaker, which is controlled by billionaire Vladimir Lisin. The port of Tuapse annually exports 14.5 million tonnes of fuel oil, gas oil and gasoline from the Tuapse refinery, owned by Russia’s largest oil firm, state-controlled Rosneft.

Strike at Ford’s Russian car plant

Workers at Ford Motor Co.’s car plant in Russia went on strike on Wednesday to demand higher wages, a senior trade union official told *Reuters* November 6. Union leader Alexei Etmanov said, “The conveyer has stopped. We started a one-day warning strike at midnight.”

Workers were demanding an increase in the basic monthly wage to up to 28,000 roubles (US\$1,137) from the current 19,000 roubles. Ford has asked a Leningrad regional court to declare the strike illegal. Ford spokeswoman Ekaterina Kulinenko said, “We have asked the court to delay the strike for a month.”

Kulinenko later told Reuters, “The workers restarted the conveyer belt at 7 p.m. (1600 GMT) after the trade union received a court ruling ordering a halt to the strike and a 20-day postponement.”

Union leader Alexei Etmanov had earlier said the workers would go on indefinite strike on November 20 unless their demands for higher wages were met. Workers at the plant near Russia’s second-largest city of St. Petersburg staged a strike in February over pay and conditions and won concessions.

Ford’s Russian plant produced 60,000 cars last year, mainly the Focus model, and has planned to increase output this year to 75,000 cars.

Africa

Sierra Leone bank workers on strike

Workers at the Bank of Sierra Leone have been on strike since November 5 over unpaid bonuses and lack of attention to staff welfare. The workers want a pay increase and a government investigation of a suspicious Le2 billion (US\$0.68 million) contract. They also want a faulty generator to be repaired.

One striker told the *Concord Times* (Freetown) that she was angry because whilst management were working in an air-conditioned building, most of the bank workers had to strike and protest in order to be treated fairly. She told the paper, “We want

our needs to be met as is our right. We don’t have any staff association working in our interests.”

The Secretary General of the Workers Association, David Francis Conteh, told *Concord Times* that he had known about the workers’ intention to strike for several days, but could do nothing to prevent it because the workers would not listen to his advice.

Also in Sierra Leone, workers of the Kenema City Council are on strike to protest against non-payment of wages for the past four months. They are also demanding that the Anti-Corruption Commission investigates the council for misappropriation of funds.

Striking Liberian rubber workers set up roadblocks

Workers at the Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC) in Margibi County, Liberia, are continuing their strike to demand “accrued salary, resettlement benefits and payoffs” after being told that the company is being wound up. The strike was preceded by a weeklong go-slow.

At a meeting on November 5 between management and the General Allied and Workers Union of Liberia (GAWUL), the latter agreed to bring the four-day strike to an end and settle the workers’ demands through negotiation. According to the *News*, the GAWUL Secretary General “warned the aggrieved workers against making trouble and threatened to deal with anyone caught inciting them.”

However, since the meeting, more than 1,000 strikers, mainly tapers, are reported to have refused to return to work and have set up roadblocks. The *News* described the anger of the plantation workers and reported that some had “threatened to besiege and ransack” the SRC plantation if their grievances were not addressed.

The present owners bought the Salala Rubber plantation and the Weala Rubber Company recently. They have merged the two companies together and called the new company the Salala Rubber Corporation.

Nigerian journalists strike over poor conditions

On November 6, journalists and other workers of *Guardian Newspapers Limited* in Nigeria took indefinite strike action over their poor conditions of service.

Members of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), National Union of Printing, Publishing and Paper Products Workers (NUPPPROW) and Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) are demanding a 50 percent pay rise, as well as full computerisation of the newsroom and provision of a bus for use by staff.

The NUJ chairman of Lagos State, Wahaab Alabi Oba, told *allAfrica.com* that after eight months of negotiations, it had become obvious that the problem was the management team’s arrogance and lack of will, rather than any practical difficulties in meeting their demands. The only response to the strike so far has been the deployment of policemen around company premises.



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