

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

7 December 2007

Europe

80,000 civil servants strike in UK

On December 6, up to 80,000 civil servants in the UK began a 48-hour strike in a dispute over an imposed three-year pay plan. The strike includes Jobcentre staff, as well as benefit office and pension workers employed by the Department for Work and Pensions.

The action was called by the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) and will result in the loss of many government provided services. As part of the strike action, the PCS is holding rallies in London and Edinburgh.

The union said that the pay plan equates to a pay freeze for 40 percent of its members employed by the DWP. Under the pay deal, workers get an average increase of just 1 percent a year, but many will get nothing. Junior members of staff at the DWP will earn just 24p above the minimum hourly wage.

The PCS said that the strike may be extended to staff at the Home Office and civilian staff at the Metropolitan Police. The union is currently balloting these employees over a three-year pay offer estimated to be worth just over 1 percent a year. Civilian workers at the Metropolitan Police have already voted to reject a 2.25 percent pay deal.

Pharmacists in Finland continue industrial action

Pharmacists in Finland continued their industrial action this week in a dispute over pay. On December 3, staff at 150 pharmacies joined the dispute, resulting in the industrial action now encompassing 60 percent of pharmacies nationwide.

The strike was called by the Finnish Pharmacists' Association, which is demanding a pay increase averaging 500 euros a month. Negotiations have been taking place over a two-week period.

Pharmacists' Association president Inka Puumalainen said, "Compared to other fields or other professionals in the private sector, our salaries are 500 or even 900 euros less than the others. We feel that our job in coming to the pharmacy is a demanding job of an expert. But the salary has not met this expectation."

Hospital doctors and college teachers strike in Greece

On December 4, hospital doctors and college teachers began a three-day strike to oppose pension reform plans and to demand better working hours and pay. Doctors are also demanding more funding for the health service.

Hospitals in Athens and the neighbouring port of Piraeus were only accepting emergency cases. Hospital doctors continued working elsewhere around the country.

The government is seeking to carry out a number of far-reaching

changes in the pension system, including unifying all pension funds, of which there are about 170.

Trade unions have warned that the changes could result in cuts to pension benefits in the future and the raising of retirement ages. It is estimated that future pension fund deficits will collectively total between €120 billion and €400 billion (US\$165 billion and US\$550 billion).

In separate disputes, college teachers in Greece began a two-day strike on December 4. This followed a strike the previous week by school teachers. Also, the previous week, journalists staged a one-day strike resulting in the cancellation of all television and radio news bulletins for 24 hours.

La Tribune newspaper workers call off strike in France

Staff employed by the French newspaper *La Tribune* suspended strike action on December 3. The strike began on November 29 over a deal by the paper's owner, LVMH, to sell the publication. LVMH is owned by France's richest man, Bernard Arnault.

LVMH decided to sell *La Tribune* after agreeing to buy the French business newspaper *Les Echos* from *Financial Times* publisher Pearson Plc.

The strike was called off by trade unions representing *La Tribune* staff after they voted by a majority of 72 percent to suspend the strike. The trade unions said that talks with LVMH executive Nicolas Bazire had taken place earlier this week.

Russian Ford workers continue strike action

This week, striking auto workers at a Ford plant near St. Petersburg in Russia resumed their picket of the factory. The workers are demanding a 30 percent pay increase.

According to trade unions, some 650 workers are currently still on strike.

The industrial action, initially involving around 1,000 workers, began on November 20 in a pay dispute. By November 30, the strike had led to lost production of 2,500 vehicles.

The police have been mobilised in an attempt to break the strike. Many officers have been deployed at the gate of the factory in order to prevent strikers from stopping strikebreakers from entering the plant.

On December 3, management of Ford Russia met with the trade union representing the workers to discuss the dispute. Boris Kravchenko, the president of the All-Russian Confederation of Labour, said the Ford workers were "fighting to improve their work conditions," before adding, "Don't make revolutionaries out of the Ford strikers."

The plant produces the Ford Focus model, with production

beginning in 2002. Since then, US\$230 million has been invested in the plant by Ford. The plant employs 2,200 workers and manufactures 300 cars a day. The company plans to increase productivity from the current 72,000 cars to 100,000 cars a year by 2009. Ford is also planning to build up to 25,000 Mondeo models a year.

Middle East

Egyptian civil servants protest to demand higher pay

On December 3, several hundred civil servants protested in front of the Egyptian government Cabinet Office in pursuit of wage increases and an end to rising prices and inflation.

The protesters are employed by Egypt's Tax Agency. They were prevented from getting close to the cabinet building by the police. Many of the workers chanted anti-government slogans including "Where is social justice?" and "The oldest tax agency is starving to death."

The action is the latest of several hundred strikes staged by workers throughout the country over the past year. The largest of these have been among textile workers, including those in the northern city of Mahalla el-Kobra.

Inflation has increased to 12 percent from December 2006 to September 2007. This stood at a low of 3.4 percent just a year before. The unemployment rate stands officially at 12 percent, but is estimated by many economists to be much higher. According to the World Bank, the level of poverty in Egypt stands at more than 20 percent.

Africa

Cameroon: Civil servants attacked by police in front of parliament building

A crowd of striking civil servants outside Parliament House were attacked by police in Cameroon. Those arrested included the president of the Confederation of Civil Service Trade Unions, Jean-Marc Bikoko. The civil servants had been peacefully chanting and blowing whistles before the police moved in. The strike had been declared illegal by the government.

The strikers' demands are focused on the re-establishment of their salaries at the pre-1993 level, as well as a 30 percent increase. The currency was devalued in 1993.

Strike by civil servants in Burundi declared illegal

A three-day national strike by civil servants in Burundi has been declared illegal by the government. The civil servants earn between US\$35 and US\$60 per month.

"Civil servants live in misery. Living conditions have become very hard," Celestin Nsavyimana, the spokesperson for the Burundian confederation of trade unions, told the press. "We decided to go on strike, so that the government thinks about revising the current salaries."

The strike stopped all work taking place in many state sectors. Civil Service Minister Clotilde Niragira threatened the strikers with serious sanctions unless they returned to work.

Striking oil worker blinded by police in Nigeria

The Nigerian "Joint Military Task Force" (JTF) carried out a brutal assault on striking contract oil workers at the Bonny Island terminal. The JTF fired tear gas canisters directly at a crowd of strikers, as well as hitting them with batons. One of the workers was blinded in his right eye during the attack.

Many of the strikers are members of National Union of Petroleum and Gas Workers (NUPENG), and they are all employed by contractors for Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas Limited (NLNG).

The reason for the protest was the breaking of an agreement by NLNG allowing them to have union recognition. In spite of making the agreement, NLNG twice refused to recognise the union, the second time on November 18. The contract workers at the Bonny Island transfer terminal started their protest shortly afterwards.

NLNG is owned jointly by the Nigerian federal government, Shell, Total and Eni's Agip.

Canadian gold company attempts to dismiss Tanzanian workforce

Canada-based Barrick Gold Corp. is seeking to dismiss the workforce at its Bulyanhulu gold mine in Tanzania and replace them with new recruits, after 1,000 out of a total workforce of 1,971 took strike action. The strike was held in an effort to secure a pay increase, as well as improved healthcare and risk allowances.

The matter is now being decided in a Tanzanian court. The strikers' union, the Tanzania Mines and Construction Workers Union (TAMICO), took the case to court on November 20, seeking an injunction to stop Barrick from hiring replacement workers until it has addressed the union's case.

Barrick has two other working gold mines in Tanzania and is developing a third, as well as a nickel mine. It is the world's largest producer of gold.

Construction workers strike in South Africa

Workers at the Nelspruit stadium have gone on strike for the second time in weeks. Their dispute is over bonuses and transport allowances. An official for the National Union of Mineworkers told reporters, "They want a R2,000 bonus and a R900 transport allowance."

The workers have recently returned to work after a strike over the same issue last month.

University cleaners strike in Uganda

Cleaners at the University of Makerere have gone on strike because they have not been paid. The university has contracted cleaning to ENRO Cleaners Ltd.

Coffee and Cocoa Bourse strike

Workers at Ivory Coast's Coffee and Cocoa Bourse (BCC) are on strike. Ivory Coast is the world's major cocoa exporter. The BCC controls the registration of cocoa for shipment.



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