

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

21 December 2007

Workers in Hungary strike to protest government attacks on health

More than 13,500 workers in Hungary staged strike action and demonstrations on December 17 to protest a new government health bill. The Socialist Party/Alliance of Free Democrats coalition government of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany passed the bill on the same day.

The strikes won widespread support, including 3,500 rail employees who declared they would take indefinite strike action. Other workers who participated included 10,000 teachers, hospital staff, farmers and airport employees.

The bill is centred on allowing private firms to eventually replace the current state insurance scheme. Under the bill, a further 22 regional health funds will also be established. The state will retain a 51 percent majority in these 22 insurance schemes, while private health insurers will be allowed to bid for the remaining 49 percent. Such a programme is designed to encourage privatisation in the health service.

The private system will begin operations on January 1, 2009. The government estimates that a billion forints (US\$574.1 million) worth of private capital will be brought into the health sector as a result. It claims that such an injection is necessary, as the country has accumulated the largest budget deficits compared to the size of its economy in the European Union. Gyurcsany said last week, "Coalition parties have agreed to continue this work [reform] which will make the country more competitive."

Despite widespread opposition from workers to the Coalition plans, several trade unions including the train drivers union refused to participate in the action.

Medical workers in Bulgaria strike

On December 13, several hundred nurses, midwives and laboratory assistants protested throughout Bulgaria to demand better wages and measures to prevent medical staff being economically forced to leave the

country. Since Bulgaria joined the European Union earlier this year, the number of medical staff leaving has escalated.

The action was called by the Association of Healthcare Professionals, which represents 45,000 members. The association is calling for a doubling of nurses' minimum pay to 440 levs a month and a reduction in the length of required university education to three years from four.

Bulgaria is officially the poorest EU nation, according to figures released in 2006. In Bulgaria, GDP per capita in purchasing power standards was 37 units. The EU average was 100 units. Monthly wages in Bulgaria are at an average of about 400 levs.

The health workers' pay dispute is the latest in a number held this year, including a six-week strike by teachers and disputes involving miners, doctors, social workers and pensioners.

Railway workers strike in Belgium

On December 15, railway workers in Belgium struck for 24 hours for the second time this month in a dispute over working conditions. The stoppage was called by the OVS-SIC rail workers' union.

It hit about 50 percent of train services serving Flanders and Brussels and about 25 percent of services in Wallonia. The high-speed Thalys service from Paris to Amsterdam via Brussels was forced to halt its final leg between the Belgian and Dutch capitals.

The union said it planned further industrial action on December 29, from 2 p.m. on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve if the dispute is not resolved. The strike affected more than 200,000 passengers due to the increase in Christmas shoppers, according to a rail network statement.

Postal workers in Staffordshire, England, take industrial action

Postal workers Staffordshire walked off the job on December 18 to protest the suspension of nine colleagues. The workers are employed at the Burslem

depot in Stoke-on-Trent. The action affected deliveries to 32,000 homes and businesses in the local ST6 post code area. The strike is set to continue until January 2.

On December 17, the Communication Workers Union met Royal Mail management in an attempt to prevent the strike, but were unable to reach an agreement. The dispute began in September, when 12 members of staff were suspended over allegations of bullying and harassment. Despite calls by the trade union for the company to initiate an independent review of the disciplinary action, this did not happen.

In an attempt to break the industrial action, Royal Mail announced that it had drafted in 200 managers.

Gravediggers in Glasgow strike in pay dispute

Gravediggers employed by Glasgow City Council in Scotland began seven days of strike action on December 18 in a pay dispute. The workers have also agreed to a blanket overtime ban to be held over another four days.

The 32 gravediggers are employed at 32 council-run cemeteries. They have refused to carry out burials on December 24, 26, 29 and 31 and January 2, 3 and 5. The dispute began when staff were informed that wage cuts of more than £2,000 were being proposed by the council.

UK coastguards' dispute continues

This week, coastguards in the UK voted by a margin of 90 percent in a consultative ballot to affirm that they would be prepared to strike. The coastguards are protesting against low pay. Were industrial action to proceed, it would represent their first strike in 186 years.

The coastguards are members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) and are employed by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. In May, union members voted for industrial action short of a strike. According to the PCS, a basic coastguard was being paid just 1p more than the minimum wage (£5.52 an hour) when the dispute began.

Since that time, some 700 coastguards have been working to rule and have withdrawn non-essential duties, including completing incident reports and end-of-month returns. The union said that if the dispute is not settled, it may authorise a full strike ballot in January.

Zambian hotel workers clash with police

Nearly 800 Kenyan hotel workers employed at the

Sun Hotel in Livingstone staged a demonstration on December 19 to demand a Christmas bonus of K1 million (US\$263), rather than the K250,000 (US\$66) offered by management.

Reports of conflict with the police claimed that two policemen had been rushed to hospital with head injuries, without mentioning any injuries amongst the strikers who had suffered from the use of tear gas.

Strikers complained that it was unfair for them to be offered only K250,000 in shopping vouchers when expatriates working at the hotel had been offered K6 million each. Other key demands of the strikers are for fair opportunities for Zambians, an end to racist remarks, and a fair chance of promotion to senior positions. The strikers also want the dismissal of the human resources manager, whom they described as cruel.

Kenyan sugar workers on strike

A group of 200 casual workers staged a sit-in at the Kibos Sugar and Allied Industry in Kisumu Town, Kenya, demanding that they be allowed to put themselves forward for permanent jobs for which the management is currently recruiting.

At the start of the working day, the supervisor went to hire casual labourers for that day. The workers refused to start their jobs unless they were permanently employed, or given protection against being left without a job.

Firestone dispute continuing in Liberia

Workers at the Firestone Plantation Company in Harbel, Margibi County, Liberia, are continuing their strike over unfair labour practices. The strike was reported by the *Inquirer* newspaper as having “paralysed normal activities” in rubber production.

Firestone management is reported to have called on the government to take immediate action. The Liberian Ministry of Labour has called on the strikers to return to work without addressing the reasons for their action.



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