

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

1 February 2008

Europe

Public sector workers strike in France

On January 24, civil servants held strike action and demonstrated throughout France to demand higher pay and protest job cuts. Tens of thousands of public sector employees were involved in the action.

The dispute involves workers including teachers, hospital workers, firemen and postal workers. The protests and strikes were called by seven of the eight public sector trade unions.

Demonstrations were held in many towns and cities, including Paris, Lyon, Toulouse, Bordeaux and the southern port city of Marseille. In Paris, an estimated 40,000 workers marched in the eastern part of the city, beginning at the Place de La Bastille. In Marseille, unions stated that an estimated 30,000 people demonstrated.

In December, the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy rejected demands for an across-the-board pay increase for public sector staff.

Polish public sector workers strike to demand better pay

Public sector employees in Poland began strike action on January 29 to demand an increase in pay. The strike involved doctors, nurses, miners, teachers, customs officials and other government employees.

A number of different disputes are taking place in the public sector. Teachers are calling for a 50 percent increase in salary and recently warned that they will consider national strike action if their demands are not met by the end of February.

The industrial action by health staff, who are also demanding better pay, affected some 18 hospitals.

The stoppage by customs officers resulted in long queues at border checkpoints throughout the day. The workers are demanding a US\$613 (1,500 zloty) salary increase and more retirement rights.

The disputes are set to continue as rail unions have also warned that industrial action may take place

among their members. Railway employees are demanding their monthly pay be increased to US\$2,166 (3,100 zloty).

Aerospace workers strike at four plants in Britain

On January 29, aerospace workers employed by Goodrich Engine Control Systems, located at sites across Britain, staged 24-hour strike action. The workers are members of the Unite trade union and are based at plants in Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Liverpool and Hemel Hempstead.

The staff are in dispute over the decision by the company to close its final salary pension scheme to new employees. Under the new proposals, all members of the pension scheme will also pay an extra 3.5 percent each month. According to the union, they will be worse off financially when they retire.

The firm supplies fuel system control equipment for all the major aero engine manufacturers, including Rolls-Royce. It also supplies aircraft flight control equipment from mainland European operations.

Unite said this week that a further 24-hour strike is scheduled to be held in two weeks pending the resolution of the dispute.

Public sector workers in Birmingham vote to strike

This week, public sector staff employed by Birmingham City council in England voted to take strike action in a dispute over pay. The vote follows a pay-restructuring plan and pay review recently announced by the council. Up to 20,000 council staff are involved in the dispute in the second largest city in Britain.

A number of trade unions represent the staff, including the largest public sector trade union, Unison. According to the union, the new pay proposals could mean some staff losing as much as £18,000 per year in pay.

The first day of industrial action is scheduled to begin on February 5.

Unison regional secretary Valerie Broom said, “Taking strike action is always the last resort, but the decision to impose grossly unfair new contracts has come as a hammer blow to staff and their families.”

Africa

Namibian radio and television news journalists on strike over pay

Employees of the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation who work on radio and television news programmes have gone on strike due to the company board refusing to fund a 6 percent salary increase. The strike has led to a news blackout on Namibian television.

On January 29, hundreds of strikers with placards gathered outside the NBC’s headquarters, shouting, “Down, down, down, your days are numbered Bob Kandetu!”

The Namibia Public Workers’ Union (Napwu) says that in addition to not getting their expected 6 percent pay increase this year, the employees are already owed an increase of 9 percent across the board that ought to be backdated to 2003. The strikers are demanding payment of both increases, together with the removal of the entire top management.

While the NBC claims it is limited by financial constraints, the workers say that money has been wasted.

Managers have taken over some radio news broadcasts themselves, but all television news reports have been stopped by the strike.

Malawian security guards face court injunction over planned strike

Malawian security guards employed by Group4 Securicor (G4S) planned to strike from January 30, but now face a court injunction stopping them from going on strike.

The guards are reported to work for around 60 hours a week, but earn little more than the US\$1 per day that the World Bank uses as the measure of “extreme poverty.” While they work for 12 hours a day, they are paid for only 10 hours due to a G4S policy of paying for overtime at half the rate paid for normal hours, according to the “UNI Global Union” web site. Most of the workers are said to be unable to afford public transport and are forced to walk for an hour and a half to get to work.

According to a press release by the charity War on

Want, due to their starvation wages the workers have to survive by eating only bread and living in homes without electricity or running water. The press release also says that the workers are unable to pay school or medical fees for their children.

G4S management has put forward a pay increase of only 12 percent—much less than the yearly increase in living costs. In the city of Blantyre, where many of the guards live, the prices of basic foods increased by 23 percent in 2007. This means that the G4S offer represents a cut in real pay of more than 10 percent. According to the article on the UNI web site, the workers believe the effective pay cut to be the management’s way of punishing them for joining a trade union.

G4S is a global company operating in more than 100 countries, and is the largest private sector employer in Africa.

Nigerian doctors call 72-hour warning strike

Nigerian doctors at the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital (UCTH) began a 72-hour warning strike on January 29 in protest at non-payment of salary arrears and the non-implementation of the agreement on the Consolidated Salary Structure Reform (CONTISS).

The strikers complain of double deductions for the 7.5 percent contributory pension scheme, double taxation for 2007, failure to adhere to agreements on salary structure and major discrepancies between CONTISS arrears at UCTH and those of other Nigerian teaching hospitals.

The doctors refused to carry out any of their normal activities for the three-day duration of the strike.

Nigerian doctors belonging to the National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) are also in dispute with the authorities over similar issues.



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