

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

8 February 2008

## Europe

### Council workers strike Birmingham City Council

On January 5, some 3,000 striking council workers employed by Birmingham City Council in England held a rally in the city centre to protest its plans to restructure wages. Birmingham City Council employs 55,000 staff and is the largest unitary council in England. The action was called by the Unison, Unite and the GMB trade unions. Members of the construction workers union UCATT were also involved in the action.

During the day strike action resulted in the closure of more than 120 schools, dozens of libraries and leisure centres and neighbourhood offices. Refuse depots were also closed due to the stoppage. The strike did not include residential homes and care service workers and teachers were also not involved in the stoppage. However, 120 of 450 schools in the city were forced to close as caretakers and teaching assistants participated in the strike.

According to the trade unions more than 4,000 staff would face a wage cut as a result of the council's plans—with some workers having their salary cut by up to £18,000 a year.

### Staff at British Embassy in Dublin strike to protest redundancies

On February 7, staff at the British embassy in Dublin in the Republic of Ireland began industrial action to protest planned redundancies in the UK Trade and Investments section.

Last month three officials at the embassy were informed they were to be made redundant. In response, 90 percent of the members of the Unite trade union voted in favour of strike action.

The union has called on the embassy to implement redundancies on a voluntary basis and to consider redeployment to other positions.

### Hungarian rail workers strike in pay dispute

This week, rail workers in Hungary began strike action in a dispute over pay. The workers are members of the

Railway Workers' Free Trade Union (VDSZSZ) that represents around 25 percent of the staff of Magyar Allamvasutak (MAV), the state railway company. As a result of the strike up to three-quarters of scheduled rail services were cancelled.

The union is demanding a pay increase of 10 percent per month and a bonus payment of 250,000 forints (\$US1,434). The company has offered a pay deal of 6.9 percent, which has been rejected.

On February 5 the strike resulted in the Moscow to Budapest train being halted at the Ukrainian-Hungarian border, where it remained for over 24 hours. On February 6, 40 percent of trains ran, up from 30 percent the previous day, according to MAV.

The four-day stoppage ended on February 7 when the railway workers union announced that staff would return to work due to safety issues. The VDSZSZ said the strike was suspended until February 15. Further negotiations between VDSZSZ and MAV are scheduled to go ahead on February 8.

The strike is the latest action by workers in opposition to the government, which is seeking to slash the budget deficit and attack jobs, pay and conditions in the public sector. According to recent statistics real wages have fallen by as much as 4.7 percent.

## Middle East

### Contracting labourers strike in Bahrain

On February 4, hundreds of labouring workers began strike action in Bahrain to demand a pay increase of 66 percent. The 750 workers are mainly of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin.

The workers are calling for their pay to be increased to 85 Bahraini dinars (US\$226.30) a month from 60 dinars currently, according to a report in the *Gulf Daily News*.

The workers are employed by Almoayyed Contracting, a civil construction and maintenance contractor, and have been in dispute with them for over two years.

One worker was quoted in the *Gulf Daily News* saying,

“Nobody wants to think about us, toiling long hours in the harsh climate here.”

The real pay of contracting workers has fallen drastically due to the increased value of the Indian rupee and other Asian currencies against Gulf currencies that are pegged to the US dollar, which is declining in value.

### **Palestinian public sector employees strike over government's utility bills plan**

Some 40,000 Palestinian public servants began a two-day strike on February 5 to protest the Palestinian Authority's proposals to force them to pay utility bills.

The government of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad has implemented new legislation demanding that Palestinians obtain a certificate showing they have paid their electricity and water bills. Without such a certificate they will not be eligible to obtain government services.

The Authority has announced that it is owed \$500 million in back utility bills. The Authority is implementing the demand under conditions where ever-increasing poverty means that employees are already struggling to pay most of their bills.

The head of the Palestinian public workers union, Bassam Zakarneh, said this week that the demand to collect the money is “illegal, hasty and wrong” and that it “harms the dignity of the employees.”

Many workers are refusing to pay the bills. A report at pr-inside.com documented the case of Ibrahim Moussa, 65, who supports an extended family of 27 people, of whom only two have been able to find jobs.

Moussa said he personally owed \$16,000 for electricity and \$5,250 for water in bills dating back to 1997. Moussa said, “We demand that the government find us jobs and then we'll pay. But as long as there are no jobs, there is no money.”

## **Africa**

### **Kenya council workers stage sit-down strike**

Two hundred thirty workers held a sit-down protest in the Town Hall at Kakamega, in Western Province, on Tuesday, February 5. The workers, employed by Kakamega municipal council, were protesting delays in the payment of their salaries. They claim they are owed Sh22m (US\$305,770).

Local Government Workers Union officials said the arrears dated back to August last year. The union had written to the town clerk but received no response. Samson Anada, union branch secretary, told the *Nation* newspaper, “We have been patient enough but the chief officers at the council are unwilling to address our

grievances.”

### **Doctors in Nigeria take action**

Doctors belonging to the National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) at the Abeokuta federal medical centre began a seven-day “warning strike” on Friday February 1. Dr Ashimi Adekunle, NARD chairman at the centre, explained that the action was in response to management's failure to implement an approved salary increase.

The doctors' action was part of a more widespread threatened strike due to begin on the same day. Doctors belonging to the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) and the affiliated NARD had called for national action to protest poor conditions they face in Nigeria's medical facilities.

The action was to be a weekly strike to take place each Friday throughout February. However, following talks between NMA, NARD representatives and the federal government, the threatened action was postponed until the end of the month. A representative of NARD, who attended the talks, told *THISDAY* that he had signed the communiqué calling off the action, although “he did not have the mandate to do so since he had not consulted with his people.”

### **Gambia airport construction workers stage sit-down strike**

Around 200 construction workers on the International Airport Improvement Project at the Gambian capital Banjul began a sit-down strike on February 1. The workers are employed by the Kuwaiti based Al-Kharafi Construction Company.

Their grievances include pay arrears, disregard of safety procedures and the “unjustified sacking” of 15 workers last year. They are also demanding a 20 percent pay increase for all workers.

A reporter from the *Daily Observer* spoke to Yankuba Camara, president of the workers committee at the site. He claimed that the company had employed workers for three years without any leave, that management was “faltering over the payment of overtime” and that there was no compensation package for emergencies or accidents. He said conditions were contrary to the Labour Act and International Labour Organisation standards.



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