

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

18 April 2008

Denmark: public sector employees strike

Public sector workers in Denmark took strike action on April 16 over pay. Up to 100,000 health and daycare workers took part to demand a 15 percent three-year pay increase. The strike was called by the Health Confederation trade union federation representing 70,000 of the strikers and the Trade and Labour union (FOA).

Local authority management has offered the workers a 12.8 percent deal, which was accepted last week by another public sector trade union, the Association of Local Government Employees' Organisations.

The industrial action involved 22,000 nurses and social workers and preschool employees in the public sector. Employees in emergency care were exempted. An estimated 25,000 children were affected as the daycare workers, members of the FOA, took strike action.

Romania: steel workers strike at Arcelor Mittal Galati

On April 14, hundreds of striking workers were attacked by security guards at a factory owned by the Arcelor Mittal Galati steel company in eastern Romania. Almost 4,000 steel workers are involved in industrial action at the plant to demand a pay increase. According to reports, the workers were attempting to occupy the factory when they were attacked by the guards who used tear gas.

Workers at the plant, which employs 13,700, are calling for a pay increase of about US\$123 a month. The firm is offering an increase worth around ROL 100 (US\$44) for those earning the lowest salaries, and a percentage increase for those on higher salaries.

The company is part of ArcelorMittal SA, the world's largest steelmaker, which bought the former nationalised plant in 2001. It formerly employed up to 28,000 workers before privatisation.

Thousands of Croatians protest for higher wages

On April 12, tens of thousands of Croatians gathered in the capital Zagreb in pursuit of higher wages and better social conditions. The trade unions are calling for legal minimum wage and pay rises in both the private and public sector in line with increases in inflation.

Up to 60,000 people attended the demonstration, according to the organisers. Some 20,000 marched through Zagreb's main Ilica Street to the Trg Bana Josipa Jelacica Square. Protesters carried banners reading "Together for Higher Wages," or "Protect the Basic Workers' Rights."

Recent statistics provided by the unions revealed that a Croatian worker earns 26 percent of the average salary in the European Union. The average net salary in January stood at 5,019 kuna (€690 or US\$1,100). This only covers 78 percent of the minimum living costs. Official figures showed that in February inflation was up 5.8 percent from the previous year, while unemployment stood at 14.7 percent.

Bulgarian steel workers strike over unpaid wages

Workers at the largest Bulgarian steelmaker, Kremikovtzi, took strike action on April 16 in a dispute over unpaid wages. According to the strike committee, management had agreed to pay all due salaries and food allowances by April 26. The committee said that more than half of the steelworkers have not received their February salaries yet, and none have received their March salaries. Food allowances for November, December

and January have also gone unpaid.

Russian bauxite miners begin hunger strike over unpaid wages

On April 13, 75 miners began a hunger strike at the Little Red Riding Hood mine in the Sverdlovsk region of Russia. The bauxite mine is owned by the United Company RusAl.

Workers are striking to demand a 50 percent pay increase, after seeing their wages fall drastically in the last year. A local trade union official said, "We decided to take the step when RusAl said it was ready to increase our salaries 5 percent, or about 800 rubles [US\$34]. They again threatened us with fines and dismissals, even though they have signed a paper saying they wouldn't. We don't believe RusAl doesn't have money to pay us," he said. "Company chairman Oleg Deripaska is the richest man in the country, he has got billions."

The company said that it would increase pay only on the basis of productivity increases. Last month, nearly 100 miners occupied the mine. They only agreed to end the occupation when RusAl officials agreed to negotiate with them. The firm has filed a lawsuit against those involved in the occupation, claiming that it was illegal.

UK journalists to stage further strike

Journalists working for Express Newspapers have called a new three-day strike. Staff voted to strike after Express Newspapers proprietor Richard Desmond refused to offer more than a 3 percent pay rise. Members of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) voted April 10 to strike for three days between April 22 and 24. This will seriously disrupt the *Express's* and *Star's* coverage of the Football Champions League semi-finals, which feature Manchester United, Chelsea and Liverpool. The industrial action will take place alongside the already announced 24-hour stoppage on April 18.

Staff at Express Newspapers held their first stoppage April 4—the first 24-hour strike in the national press for 18 years—although it did not prevent the titles being published the next day.

France: Rouen port workers to strike against privatisation

On April 18, workers at the French port of Rouen are set to strike for 24 hours in protest at the government's plans to privatise the loading activities of state-run ports. The head of the port workers' union, Pierre Hannon, told Reuters, "The strike will take place at the port of Rouen on April 18 and should start at 0400 GMT."

The union called on port workers to hold 24-hour strikes on a weekly basis, with each port choosing their day for action.

Romania: Renault workers end pay strike

On April 11, auto workers ended a 19-day strike over pay at Renault's Dacia plant after management agreed to raise staff wages by around 23 percent, on average, in 2008. Employees at the plant had previously demanded a 65 percent pay increase. The previous day, some 6,000 workers took part in a protest rally in the city of Pitesti.

The firm said that monthly wages would increase by around 435 lei (US\$191) before tax this year. Dacia workers on average earn 1,900 lei a month.

Dacia is the maker of the "no-frills" Logan model series of cheaper cars

developed for poorer countries. The Logan has played a significant part in Renault's attempts to boost its overall sales and is now made in many countries. In 2008, Dacia's auto production would be in the region of 320,000 cars. Christian Esteve, a Renault executive who heads the Dacia board, said the action had cost the company around €3 million in fixed costs and €10 in other costs at Dacia and its suppliers.

Renault has teamed up with India's Bajaj Auto to make an even cheaper car after Tata announced the €1,700 (US\$2,689) Nano model. Toyota Motors announced April 11 that it would also make a cheap vehicle for the Indian market.

Sugar cane workers strike in southern Iran

Last week, sugar cane workers at the Haft Tapeh Sugar Cane factory in Shoosh, southern Iran, took strike action to demand unpaid wages. Employees at the Amir-Kabir factory of Dasht-e Azadegan also walked off the job. By April 13, the workers entered the fifth day of their industrial action. The previous day, the workers held a demonstration outside the office of the factory manager, Yaqoub Shafiee.

According to reports, management has attempted to divide the workers by paying last year's bonus to some of the striking workers. In response, the striking staff said the dispute would only end when all of them had received their payments in full.

Lecturers in Uganda continue strike over pay

More than 300 members of the academic staff at the Kyambogo University in Uganda have been on strike since the beginning of March over irregular pay, reductions in their earnings, non-payment of benefits and other issues related to working conditions.

The lecturers have won the support of students at the university. According to a report in *New Vision*, when the dispute began the police arrived to drive out the students and take control of the campus. In the process, seven students were arrested and a policeman was injured.

On April 9, student leaders camped outside parliament, carrying placards demanding that the government settle the dispute. They vowed to stay there until they met President Yoweri Museveni. They were dispersed by the police.

This week, the Social Service Committee ordered Kyambogo University Academic Staff Association to produce a full list of lecturers at the university and to submit their appointment letters as soon as possible to help the committee understand their terms of reference. The chairman of the committee, James Kubeketerya, said, "We need to look at your appointment letters to be in position to know what you agreed on with the university, before you resume work."

The university authorities are accused by the striking academics of "buying time." Dr. Maria Kaahwa of the education faculty told *New Vision*, "The salary structures for all public universities are already stated. Is Kyambogo not a public university? They are making us suffer.... I have been here for seven years and the continued promotions and promises have been our daily, though unfulfilled consolations."

The lecturers are also complaining over the lack of necessary teaching materials. "We have some practical lessons at the university but have no materials. In such a situation, what can we do?" asked Victor Locoro of the Kyambogo University Academic Staff Association.

Ugandan construction workers strike over unfair pay

Construction workers building the Bujagali power dam in Jinja, Uganda, staged a sit-down strike on April 8 over pay. They are employed by Salini, subcontractor to the Aga Khan's company, Bujagali Energy, which is running the multimillion-dollar project in conjunction with the Ugandan government.

The Ugandan employees, who are mainly machine operators and drivers, say that they are paid less for doing the same work than those coming from other countries. They also say they are aggrieved due to harassment by security officials on the site, unexplained deductions from their salaries and intimidation by their superiors.

Local government workers strike in Imo State, Nigeria

Local government workers in Imo State, Nigeria, have launched indefinite strike action to pressure the state government over six demands, including a 15 percent pay increase, payment of arrears based on the N7,500 (US\$65) minimum wage and to "conduct and release without delay, the 2006, 2007 and 2008 promotions in the state public service."

The strike call, which was backed by the Nigerian Labour Congress, the State Public Service Negotiating Council and the Trade Union Congress, was sent out to all public servants. All government buildings in Imo were closed on April 14, the first day of the strike.

Nurses on work-to-rule in Botswana

Nurses in several areas of Botswana have begun a work-to-rule after being excluded from "scarce skills allowances" that are being paid to other health professionals. This means that the nurses are sticking to the work they are paid for—strictly nursing care.

The nurses involved told the *Reporter* (Gaborone) that they have been expected to consult, diagnose, venu-puncture, prescribe medication, and apply sutures, even though these skills are usually the preserve of medical practitioners. They added that they had to do drugs management, which includes dispensing, ordering of drugs and medical equipment, and stocktaking as well as transporting and issuing of corpses. Promises had been made that nurses who acquired additional diplomas in their specific areas of specialisation would be rewarded, but this was not happening.

Another problem they face is the lack of legal backup if any complications occur while performing duties not in their job descriptions.

The nurses insist that they have continually argued for removal of these non-nursing duties through their unions but without success. In view of this, they feel entitled to receive scarce skills allowances.

Nursing officials in Selebi-Phikwe prepared a petition for President Ian Khama, Minister of Health Lesego Motsumi and Minister of Local Government Margaret Nasha about their concerns. It states, "The undersigned nurses will stop performing the above listed non-nursing duties and will reserve them for responsible nursing personnel."

However, the Nurses Association of Botswana (NAB) held up the presentation of the petition to allow negotiations to take place. The nurses involved told *New Vision* that they expect results from the NAB by April 19 or they would do "what they deemed appropriate."



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