

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

31 October 2008

French public sector workers strike and demonstrate

Workers in French public sector trade unions held a strike and a demonstration in Paris October 23 to protest against the government's policies, including its General Public Policy Revision (révision générale des politiques publiques--RGPP).

Under the RGPP plan, the government intends to cut 36,000 public sector jobs in 2009. It will not replace half of all retiring civil servants, implement forced workplace transfers, reduce state services and remove department-level administrations.

According to the website of Public Services International (PSI), "It would also mean increased inequality among citizens and difficulties in acquiring education, justice and health, an increase in taxes and the elimination of subventions for local authorities."

Workers at Irish aluminium firm picket for union recognition

The union SIPTU and management at Curran Aluminium, in Limerick, went into dispute, October 28, when workers held a picket of the Roxboro company for the second time in just over two months.

SIPTU, which is fighting for recognition at the company, claims that a recent Labour Court recommendation improving terms and conditions for workers has not been implemented. The union also claims that seven of the workers had been made redundant without adhering to a "last in, first out" policy. Curran Aluminium says that a recent inspection by the National Employment Rights Authority found that the company is fully compliant with all relevant employment rights legislation. A spokesman said the firm operate a "last in, first out" policy, subject to the retention of workers with key skills.

Thousands of Dublin teachers and parents protest cutbacks

The *Belfast Telegraph* reported that around 12,000 teachers, parents and students protested in Dublin on October 29 against the Irish government's planned cutbacks in education.

"The demonstration was the third major protest against measures included in this month's budget following similarly large marches by pensioners and third-level students. Last night's rally was timed to coincide with the start of a Dail debate on a Labour Party motion calling for the education cuts to be reversed," it stated.

Anger over primary and second-level class size increases and registration fee hikes of 66 percent of third-level students as well as a possible return to student tuition fees also led to a 10,000-strong protest October 22.

Irish airport workers strike over change in workweek

Industrial action was set for this week at Carnmore, Galway Airport.

Airport employees, including ground crew, fire crew, terminal agents and bar and shop workers voted decisively for industrial action due to a reduction in workers' hours. The cut from a 39-hour week to

20 hours per week will come into effect from November 2, affecting 45 workers and the bypassing of industrial relations procedures by management.

The workers, members of trade union SIPTU, notified management at the airport October 21 of their proposed strike action.

UK brewery workers strike over below-inflation wage deal

Brewery workers at an historic Kent-based brewer and pub operator, Shepherd Neame, will demonstrate on October 31 against a below-inflation wage "rise" deal.

The brewery workers are demanding a wage increase above inflation to help them keep pace with the rising cost of living. The demonstration will be accompanied by an overtime ban and work to rule.

David Weeks, Unite Regional Officer, said, "This is a very profitable local brewery and they can well afford a living wage rise for their workers. All we are saying is that our members deserve a fair share of the profits they have helped to make for the Neame family and the shareholders.

"Imposing a below inflation wage deal on our members is effectively a pay cut. This is something the staff find hard to take knowing the company is raking in profits, while they struggle to pay for everyday essentials like food and fuel."

Shepherd Neame, one of Britain's oldest breweries, was established in Faversham in 1698 and employs over 1,000 people. The company recently announced an operating profit of £12.6million. Management remuneration packages jumped from £1,298,000 to £1,355,000 in 2007.

The dispute affects 130 workers involved in brewing, filtering and casking of beers brewed at the Faversham distillery. There is also a distribution and transport centre on the site, delivering to pubs and supermarkets. Average salary is £21, 067, for a 39 hour week, including the 3.25 percent pay rise. Inflation is currently 5.2 percent.

UK demonstration for sufferers of asbestosis

Hundreds of workers marched on Westminster, October 28 to lobby Parliament to demand justice for asbestos victims and the restoration of compensation for victims of pleural plaques.

Thousands of workers seriously ill from asbestosis have been left in "compensation limbo" by a House of Lords decision, in October 2007, which ended the right of those with pleural plaques to compensation. While not in themselves a fatal condition, pleural plaques are an indicator of asbestosis and an estimated 20 percent of sufferers go on to develop fatal mesothelioma.

According to the trade union Unite, the workers are victims of employer negligence and are facing the twin blows of knowing they have a very high risk of developing an asbestos-related disease that will kill them, and the denial of the right to compensation for their

families.

Unite Deputy General Secretary, Graham Goddard, said: "The Lords' ruling was a disaster for working people. There is only one cause of this disease and that is the widespread, indiscriminate use of asbestos throughout industry for years. No one protected our people from this exposure, and now they are suffering. Employers' insurers simply want to walk away leaving workers, whose lungs are now full of asbestos, facing a lifetime of worry and not a penny in compensation."

Egyptian journalists end hunger strike over union membership

On October 22, journalists ended a hunger strike they began four days previously, but stated their intention to continue the sit-in at the headquarters of the journalists' union to protest the organisation's refusal to grant them membership.

The hunger strike was called off following a decision to hold a meeting between a delegation of *El-Badeel* journalists and Abdel Mohsen Salama, the head of the committee which signs off on membership applications. According to the *Daily News Egypt*, journalists "allege that the decision to award Syndicate membership is political, and point to the fact that no journalists employed by government-controlled *Al-Ahram* are denied Syndicate membership."

Three journalists, Mohamed Abdel Raouf, Abdu Zaky and Omar Said from *El-Badeel*, and Ramy Hussein from *Al-Dostour* were admitted to hospital after collapsing as a result of the hunger strike.

Abo Shady told *Daily News Egypt* that membership was decided in an arbitrary manner, and that the only clear factor involved is the rejection of journalists for political reasons. He says eight of the 10 *El-Badeel* journalists rejected (out of a total of 46 applicants) by the committee are known to have leftist political views.

Iranian petrochemical workers walkout

According to the web site of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), workers and subcontractors went on strike over pay cuts in the southwestern city of Lordegan October 27.

All 400 employees of the petrochemical company reportedly walked out. The NCRI said that the management was supposed to have signed a long term contract with the part time workers after a 45 days temporary deal. However, after 65 days the management refused to sign the new contract.

On October 26, over 200 building machineries rented for the company stopped working since their operators were on strike. Workers at two nearby sister companies also came out on strike in support of the strikers.

According to NCRI, managements at all the firms are well connected to the central government. "It has been used as a major tactic by the industrial firms with government backings not to hire workers on permanent basis to escape paying for workers' health insurance and other benefits," said the NCRI website. On October 21, the state-run news agency ILNA reported that Mohammad Jahromi, the Iranian government's Labour Minister, said, "More than 250,000 workers lost their jobs in the first six months of Iranian Persian calendar year starting March 22. We should expect the figure to rise." NCRI said that this comes at time when "according to the regime's own figures an additional one million people entered the labour market in the same period." NCRI listed the following firms, among the hundreds it claimed, that saw workers' protest and strikes last year in response to layoffs and disputes over back pay:

Havt-Tapeh Sugar Cane Factory in the southern city of Shoosh, Kiyan; Tire factory in Saveh; Tabas Mining Factory, Sarcheshmeh; Copper Factory in the southern city of Kerman; Jihad Agriculture in

the southern city of Bushehr; Gavmishan Dam Factory and Sugar-Beet Factory in the western city of Kamyaran; Siyah-Roukh Factory in the western city of Divandareh; Energy Company in the southern city of Asaloyeh; Aras China Factory in the north western province of Azerbaijan; Pashmineh Baf Factory in the western city of Qazvin; Mehrpouya Textile Factory in the central city of Isfahan; Navard Company in the western city of Karaj; Iran's Telecommunications and Sandouq Nasouz in Tehran; Hamid China Factory and municipal workers in Sa'adabad; Avangan factory in the central city of Arak and Iran Khodro in Tehran.

Council workers threatened with dismissal for strike in Cameroon

Around 100 striking council workers were threatened with dismissal by the Divisional Officer (DO) of Douala V in Cameroon. Their demands were for the council to implement a salary rise of 15 percent which had been promised in a presidential decree in March this year, and payment of leave allowance and health insurance.

The DO accused them of being politically motivated as the strike action begun on October 23 was just three days before planned elections. The DO said he would only listen to the workers' grievances after the elections had been completed.

The workers were also advised to return to work by the Divisional Syndicate of Council Workers. They criticized the "poor timing" of the strike, just prior to the elections. The council workers returned to work before the October 26 elections, with none of their demands met.

Zambian telecom workers defy union call to return to work

Striking employees of the Zambia Telecommunications Company (Zamtel) in Kitwe have refused to obey a call to return to work from their union, the National Union of Communication Workers (NUCW).

Zamtel employs nearly 3,000 workers. The strike, the second this year, is in pursuit of a salary increase and improved conditions.

NUCW General Secretary, Clement Kasonde, personally urged the striking workers to return to work. Negotiations had been expected to start in April this year, but management postponed them citing the company's weak financial position.

Zamtel workers are also coming under pressure from the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). ZCTU Acting Secretary General Ian Mkandawire said, "Zamtel is an essential telecommunications company and if the current dispute is not properly handled, the strike might have adverse affects on the smooth process of transmitting election results from outlying polling stations to the central point."

Presidential elections are due October 30, following the death of incumbent president Levy Mwanawasa in August this year.



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