

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

29 April 2011

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

French school occupations to continue

A spate of schools occupations in France is to continue after the Easter holidays.

Since the end of March, there have been increasing numbers of schools occupations, in response to the eradication of almost 16,000 teaching posts, the closure of classes, the threatened closure of schools and increases in class sizes.

The occupations have been mainly concentrated on infant and primary schools, but have also included middle schools for 11- to 14/15-year-olds and those lycées with “Collèges” attached to them.

The first occupation began at an infant school in the village of Kernéval, south of Brest in the northwest. They spread throughout the country, with all night occupations lasting several days.

In and around the Montpellier area in the southwest, there have been at least 15 occupations of infant and primary schools. Further north in Lunel there have been several blockades of schools and also a blockade of the offices of the education section of the Prefecture.

By some estimates at least 250 occupations have taken place to date. The initiative for these occupations seems to have come mainly from parents and teachers.

24-hour Greek dockers strike set for May

A 24-hour strike and work stoppage has been announced by dockworkers for May 1.

The dockworkers are expected to hold an initial strike gathering in Karaiskaki Square in Piraeus.

Ireland: Industrial action threatened over unqualified teaching posts

The Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) has threatened industrial action in schools where unqualified persons are employed from 2013.

The INTO threat was “post-dated” at a time of teacher shortages a few years ago. Recent cutbacks—700 jobs in primary schools are being cut in

September—have turned a teacher shortage into a surplus.

INTO estimates that hundreds of newly qualified teachers are without regular work, while another 2,000 primary teachers graduating this year face bleak job prospects. There will be about 1,600 new graduates this year with a post-primary teaching qualification.

INTO President Jim Higgins has said he wants panels of qualified teachers set up to fill vacancies, adding that he believed there should be strict time limits on the employment of a retired teacher or unqualified persons. It is estimated that 400 people with no teaching qualifications worked for at least 50 days in primary schools in the current school year, over a quarter of the full school year.

Figures obtained by the *Irish Independent* revealed that half of the country’s 3,200 primary schools employed an unqualified person for up to a week in the September-February period. This is the first time the scale of unqualified teaching levels has been revealed.

Irish solicitors refuse to take cases in pay dispute

Solicitors in Belfast have been refusing to take any serious criminal case in the Crown Court since last week in a dispute over pay.

The Solicitors Criminal Bar Association (SCBA) is backing the decision by lawyers not to represent their clients in the higher court. It follows a conflict between the association and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service, which wants to save millions of pounds in legal aid.

Pearse MacDermott, from the association, said, “Recent action has been taken as it is felt that the rates of remuneration introduced will jeopardise access to justice, particularly in more complicated and serious criminal cases.”

Cases can spend months being heard in magistrates’ courts before they are passed to the Crown Court.

MacDermott said all briefs in Belfast proceeding from the magistrates’ to Crown Court since April 21 have involved solicitors refusing to take them and the same action had been taken across other parts of Northern Ireland.

Solicitors calculate that they face a 54 percent reduction in the level of fees for legal services provided to defendants in Crown Courts following changes introduced last week. The solicitors have submitted a joint proposal with the Bar Council of barristers, which they believe would yield savings worth £16.7 million.

UK refuse collectors may strike in Birmingham

Refuse collectors in the UK’s second largest city, Birmingham, are

considering industrial action after the city council reneged on an agreement which ended a lengthy recent dispute over pay.

The council and the joint trade unions (GMB, UCATT, Unite and Unison) signed an agreement in March, which ended the long-running dispute. But the council has failed to implement the agreement, which was accepted by a membership vote with a 2 to 1 majority.

Finnish paper workers strike in wage dispute

Hundreds of workers at paper mills began a strike April 26. It started a day early to confound hired strikebreakers.

The Ammattiliitto Pro trade union says the walkouts include 1,500 members employed at forestry firms, Stora Enso and Metsaliitto plants.

Earlier this month, around 1,000 office workers held a two-week strike at paper mills, owned by UPM-Kymmene, to try to speed up stalled talks after negotiations broke down.

Stora Enso said it was not yet clear how many staff were on strike, adding it would not have an immediate impact on production. The strike was scheduled to end on May 11.

Stora Enso has been cutting back on paper production capacity, as the industry faces overcapacity and shrinking newspaper and magazine markets.

Ammattiliitto Pro and employers' representatives have not been able to reach an agreement on a new wage deal.

Iranian workers' protest unpaid wages

Hundreds of workers at the Alborz tire factory near Tehran gathered in front of the presidential office to demand nine months of unpaid wages and the reopening of the plant, according to RFE/RL's Radio Farda.

A factory employee told Radio Farda that around 800 workers participated in the protest on April 24. Since the Alborz tire factory was privatised in the 1990s, its 1,300 workers have been paid irregularly.

A number of workers at the Esfahan Steel Company gathered in front of the parliament building in Tehran to protest the non-payment of their wages, ISNA (Iranian Students News Agency) reported.

Also on April 24, about 100 workers and their families gathered outside the Fars Organization of Industries and Mines in Shiraz seeking payment of their wages for the past six months, a worker told Radio Farda.

Botswana: Public sector worker strike enters second week

The strike by public sector workers in Botswana, which began April 16, continued this week. Around 93,000 public sector workers, members of five unions organised under the Botswana Federation of Public Sector Unions, are on strike to demand a 16 percent wage increase. The workers include teachers, doctors and nurses and account for about 90 percent of government employees. It is the first mass public sector strike in Botswana's history.

Some workers, such as doctors and nurses classed as "essential", were forced to return to work this week after the government took out legal

action against them.

The government has offered a 5 percent pay increase, but workers are angry and demanding a higher settlement after suffering a three-year wage freeze and with inflation currently running at nearly 9 percent. The government claims there is no money to finance a higher pay rise.

Botswana relies on the export of diamonds for more than 50 percent of its income and is described as a "middle income" country. While the economy contracted by nearly 5 percent in 2009, last year it grew by over 7 percent and is considered one of Africa's top performing economies. However, Botswana is now getting reduced revenues from the Southern African Customs Union, of which it is a member. Government debt has built up to about 11.5 percent of gross domestic product.

Economic advisers say that meeting the unions' wage demands would disrupt plans, in line with global financial markets, to slash the budget deficit in the 2012 fiscal year.

Miners strike in Mozambique

Miners at the Kenmare Resources' Moma mine took unofficial strike action yesterday, after annual wage negotiations broke down. No further details of the dispute have been made public.

Kenmare Resources' main asset is the Moma Titanium Minerals Mine, located on the coast of Mozambique. It contains reserves of heavy minerals, which include the titanium minerals ilmenite and rutile, as well as the high-value zircon mineral.

Ugandan steel workers strike

Tembo steel workers in the district of Inganga, Uganda, went on a sit-down strike yesterday in protest at low pay and poor working conditions. Workers complained that their pay of 40,000 shillings per month, or \$16.80, was too low given the high cost of living. No safety gear was provided, and workers had to pay for it themselves.

Other grievances included mistreatment by management. "We are mistreated by the bosses and those involved in accidents in the factory are neglected" one of the workers reported. "About three people were involved in accidents late last year at the furnace but were not given any money to take care of themselves and when you look at them they are in bad condition."

"Given the bad situation, here some of the female workers are forced to have sex with the bosses so that they can get some money to buy food and support their families", said a female worker.

The strikers were told to go back to work by Vincent Ojiambo, general secretary of the Ugandan Mines, Metal, Oil, Gas and Allied Workers Union. But workers said they would not return until their concerns had been addressed.

The workers went on strike last year over the same issues.



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