

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

25 October 2002

One million workers in general strike against government policies in Italy

A million workers took general strike action and demonstrated in Italy on October 18 to protest against labour market reforms, attacks on the rights of employees and health and education budget cuts by the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

The strike was called by the CGIL, the largest union in Italy with nearly six million members, and had a widespread impact as air, rail and local transport services were hit with more than 250 flights cancelled and 100 train services stopped, affecting 40 percent of routes nationally. Education, banking, museum, leisure, shop and health workers also joined the strike. Protests were held in 120 towns and cities. An estimated 250,000 marched through the streets of Milan in one of the largest demonstrations. One member of the CGIL who participated in a demonstration in Rome said, "We are here... to continue our fight against this government and to reaffirm our belief in the need to protect workers' rights, their salaries and their jobs".

The strike follows the announcement that Fiat, the largest private company in the country, is to make a fifth of its workforce redundant. A large rally of thousands of workers was held in the centre of the northern industrial city of Turin, the Fiat headquarters.

The government plans to amend a 1970 labour law to allow firms to lay off workers more easily. With companies announcing more than 20,000 redundancies in the past few weeks, workers fear that this change could threaten hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The general strike is the second this year against the government. In April the CGIL, CISL and UIL union federations called the first general strike in two decades. Around 13 million workers took part. Since then the CISL and UIL have opposed further industrial action on a national scale and have pledged to work with the government. Both unions instructed their members not to support the latest strike.

A large number of half-day and full-day strikes have been held throughout the country this year, with 25 million working hours lost to strikes and other protests. This represents a near 500 percent increase on the same period last year.

Workers and miners protest against Polish government

Three thousand shipyard workers, steelworkers and miners demonstrated in the Polish capital of Warsaw on October 22.

The workers were protesting against high levels of unemployment and for increased state funding. The demonstration lasted for 90 minutes, with demonstrators demanding that Prime Minister Leszek Miller guarantee bank credits for 12 vessels under construction at Poland's largest shipyard in Gdynia.

Some of the workers carried banners and placards accusing the government of "sinking" Poland's shipyards. Earlier this year the major shipyard in the north-western city of Szczecin was declared bankrupt, raising fears for the industry's future. The government refused to save the yard and the banks would not support a rescue package. The shipyard industry employs some 70,000 workers.

Last week the government guaranteed 215 million zlotys (US\$52 million) of bank credits for two of the ships under construction in Gdynia. The ships are to be bought by the US forest products giant Weyerhaeuser.

This credit is not sufficient for its survival and the shipyard still requires guarantees for another 10 vessels.

Poland has a population of 39 million and unemployment is above 17 percent nationally.

Education workers hold strikes and protests in France

On October 17 a national protest day of the whole state education sector, from the maternelles (nursery school) to the universities and research institutions, was held in France.

The protest was called by the five major education unions and was supported by high school and university student organisations, parents groups, other educational organisations and trade unions.

The strike closed state sector schools all over the country, amid fears of job and funding cuts. It came just three weeks after energy utility workers demonstrated and struck nationally against the newly elected Raffarin government's plans to partially privatise Electricite de France and Gaz de France.

The trade unions involved reported that 60 percent of the education workers supported the day of action. There were demonstrations by teachers and pupils in some 100 communities. Demonstrators in Paris and Marseille totalled over 30,000, in Brest 6,000 and Toulouse 5,000.

The strike protest was directed against the planned abolition of the jobs of 5,600 "surveillants" (classroom assistants) at the end of this year and the refusal of the Raffarin administration to continue the employment of 20,000 "emploi-jeunes". The emploi-jeunes are the product of the previous Prime Minister' Lionel Jospin's 1997 program to employ young people in the education sector. The employment of the surveillants is a traditional institution, created in 1937 to give poorer students the possibility to earn some money observing and looking after pupils at schools.

Education Minister Luc Ferry has stated that the new government intends mothers of families and pensioners to work in future as "assistants of education" instead of the surveillants and emploi-jeunes. The government intends to change the constitution, with the local authorities being forced to carry out functions presently assigned to central government, including education. The local authorities will have to finance Ferry's 11,000 planned assistants of education.

Ferry's proposals also include the transfer of 170,000 non-teaching personnel (technical and administrative) to the responsibility of local authorities. Trade unions have raised the fear that this could lead to regional variations in education, depending on wealth. Last week an opinion poll showed 73 percent of French people either supported or sympathised with the strikers.

On November 4, there will be a national meeting of the trade unions in the education sector to discuss further action.

Driving test staff walk off the job in France

On October 21, 80 percent of the 1,000 French driving test inspectors began an indefinite strike. The employees are members of the Force Ouvriere trade union and are officials of the "direction de securite et circulation routiere" (DSCR).

The strike is in protest at the Raffarin administration's plan to subordinate the administrations of the DSCR to the so-called "directions departementales de l'equipement" (DDE). The inspectors fear that this is

the first step to the privatisation of driving test examinations. At the moment, driving lessons at special schools must be paid, but the examinations are free.

Another issue in the dispute is a shortage of examination personnel. The application of European directives demands 45 minutes of examination for category B driver tests, which in reality only lasts 20 minutes. The 45-minute tests will be compulsory in 2003/2004, but for 2003 there are only 77 new job vacancies planned. The inspectors are also demanding the re-evaluation of their wages.

Hewlett-Packard staff strike against job losses

On October 17, 1,000 of the 2,600 workers employed by PC manufacturer Hewlett-Packard near Grenoble in France demonstrated for two hours against the shedding of 1,206 jobs nationally. The jobs are to be lost at Grenoble with 609 redundancies, 370 in Ile-de-France and the closure of the Annecy plant with 177 job losses.

On the same day, the Annecy workers held a one-hour blockade of the factory. There were also protests at the factories in Isle d'Abeau (Isère) and Sophia-Antipolis /Alpes-Maritimes. The workers are members of the CGT, CFDT and CGC.

Independent doctors unions call national strike

Last week the two major medical trade unions in France, the CSMF and SML, whose sub-branches represent some 85-90 percent of the specialist practitioners, have called for a national strike.

The strike involves independently working doctors with private practices or working in the private wings of hospitals. Only the emergency-centres are to be kept open during the strike. The dispute began in September 2002 with strikes by the individual specialist branches.

The union's main demand is an increase in doctors' fees, which have not risen for seven years. The doctors are also demanding new regulations mainly concerning the specialists' liability insurance. Since March 4, new legislation has obliged all members of the medical profession to pay into an insurance scheme. The premiums have grown so much for some specialists such as surgeons that they cannot afford to pay.

A further issue in the dispute is the government's support for modern equipment with expensive medical instruments such as cancer-diagnostic scanners, when there is inadequate funding for this by the health assurance schemes.

UK firefighters to hold national strike action

Firefighters in the UK are to hold national strike action for the first time since 1977 in a long-standing pay dispute with the national fire authority and the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair. The strike has been called by the Fire Brigades Union, which is calling for a pay increase of 40 percent to bring fully qualified firefighters' pay up to a basic of £30,000 a year, in line with other public service professionals. The union plans to hold six strikes before the end of this year.

The first strike will begin on October 29 and end on October 31. Others will stretch over eight days, with one ending on November 4, the day before Bonfire Night, and another on Christmas Eve. The FBU's 50,000 members voted nine to one in favour of action.

Blair has condemned the planned strikes, stating that they would cause "havoc" regarding public sector pay and even push up mortgage payments. He stated that there is "no way" the government will support such a pay deal. The government has called on the union and firefighters to call off the strikes and participate in a "review" of firefighters' pay and conditions.

Blair said on October 21, "No government could yield... because other people in the public sector would say 'If they are getting 40 percent, I want 40 percent'." The review of firefighters' pay and conditions will not be held until December.

Fire Service Minister Nick Raynsford said the firefighters' decision to strike was "wretched and wrong" and lives would be "put in peril".

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott said the strike would be "dangerous and damaging".

The government has authorised the use of 840 army Green Goddess fire engines to provide emergency cover during the strikes. The Green Goddesses were built in the 1950s. The army and personnel from the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force have been training with the vehicles during the past few months in preparation for a strike.

Last week Blair initiated meetings of the committee that deals with national emergencies, nicknamed Cobra. The committee includes the prime minister, officials from the Ministry of Defence, the office of the deputy prime minister and other government departments. The committee has met previously over the September 11 attacks, the foot-and-mouth epidemic and the fuel protests.

Andy Gilchrist, the leader of the FBU, said in response to the government's statements, "John Prescott's comments are astonishing. He led the rush by cabinet ministers only last year to vote themselves a 40 percent rise. We have been placed in an appalling position. All the government has to do is start genuine pay talks. It is that simple."

Kenyan teachers end strike

Kenyan teachers returned to work on October 22, after their union's decision-making body accepted an agreement in which the government can delay payment of their promised pay rise until after the middle of next year. The Kenyan National Union of Teachers (KNUT) called the national strike on September 22, involving about 240,000 teachers in state schools.

The agreement involves the government paying the four outstanding phases of the pay rise of between 150-200 percent from July 1, 2003, but this is to happen only after a subcommittee is appointed to work out the payment schedule. This committee is to finalise a report by November 30. Since general elections are due to take place in December, the government has effectively avoided making any increase in teachers' pay. The government promised not to victimise teachers for taking part in the strike and to rescind the cancellation of the checkoff system for payment of union dues, which would be the main concern of the union bureaucracy.

Some KNUT members organised protests against the ending of the strike, accusing the national officials of betraying them. Many wanted at least one phase of the promised pay rise implemented immediately. Local officials attacked the national leadership. "KNUT national officials have failed us in a big way this time," said Ahaya Juma Ahaya. "How can they agree to call off the strike without securing guarantees as to whether the government will be able to honour its obligation in the future?"

The timing of the strike suggested a high degree of cynicism from KNUT leaders, fearing the growing anger of their members. Given the closeness of the general elections, the promise of a future pay rise with no real commitment was a likely outcome. The present dispute originates in the government renegeing on promises made in the 1997 settlement.

IRIN news quoted Albert Mwenda, of the Nairobi-based Institute of Economic Affairs, referring to the weak state of the Kenyan economy and the current freeze on lending to Kenya by the IMF and World Bank. He claimed that over one billion dollars would be needed annually to meet the teachers' demands: "There were no new efforts by the government towards mobilising such resources, which means the government was not committed to making those payments... But certainly, teachers and students are losers in this deal."

Zimbabwean teachers defy victimisation, continue strike

Teachers in Zimbabwe are continuing their strike for better pay, despite government harassment. The teachers have been on strike since October 8 and are demanding a 100 percent salary increment backdated to January this year and another 100 percent cost of living adjustment backdated to June. Inflation in Zimbabwe is now 135 percent.

The government has ordered the dismissal of more than 600 teachers for taking part in the strike. Most schools in Harare and Bulawayo are now without teachers in a situation where hundreds of teachers have already

left the country for jobs in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and even Britain and the United States as the economy has plummeted.

Raymond Majongwe, secretary-general of the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ), was released from jail October 21 after the magistrate dismissed the government's charges against him for allegedly forcing teachers to attend meetings. Zimbabwe's new Public Order and Security Act makes it an offence for "any person who, acting in concert with one or more other persons, forcibly invades the rights of other people." Majongwe's lawyer alleged that he was beaten up whilst in jail.

Around 2,000 students took to the streets of Harare on October 21 to protest the dismissal of their teachers. Majongwe said, "The government's continued harassment has only strengthened our resolve to continue with the strike."

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