

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

17 January 2004

Transport workers strike in Italy

On January 9 transport workers throughout Italy held strike action in a series of staggered strikes. Bus, train and metro workers held a number of strikes, with some beginning in the early hours of the morning and ending as late as 8.00 p.m.

The strike affected all the main cities including Rome, Naples and Milan. Transport trade unions are protesting legislative proposals of the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, including labour and pension reforms. The dispute also dates back to 2001 when the transport workers contract expired. Workers in the public sector demanded a pay increase of 106 euros (\$133) a month. The employers proposed a small increase of just 41 euros. Last year a deal was negotiated that many workers opposed.

Airline workers strike in Italy

On January 8 air traffic controllers in Italy held an eight hour strike in a dispute over pay and conditions. The strike is the latest in a series by workers, who have effectively worked without a contract for more than two years and are protesting a wage freeze and 2,700 job losses.

The stoppage led to the cancellation of and delays of hundreds of flights around Europe and affected the travel schedules of more than 22,000 passengers. The state-controlled Alitalia reported that 334 of its international and domestic flights were cancelled. The knock on effect of the action resulted in flight cancellations to and from the Italy by airlines in the UK, Holland, Germany, Austria, Spain and Greece.

On January 19, staff at Alitalia are to hold a further strike.

The airline is forecasting an operating loss of more than 400 million euros for 2004, and states that its restructuring plans, including job losses, will enable it to return to profitability in 2005, when it intends to join a merger of Air France and KLM.

UK Land Rover workers set to strike in pay conflict

Workers employed by auto manufacturer Land Rover are to hold a 24-hour strike on January 26 in a dispute over pay. The strike will involve up to 8,000 workers at the company's plants in Solihull and Gaydon, in Warwickshire. The workers are currently engaged in an overtime ban.

The strike has been called by the Transport and General Workers Union, which stated this week that it still wished to resolve the dispute by negotiation and avert strike action. Dave Osborne, the National Secretary of the union, said, "In view of the company's reluctance to reopen negotiations it is felt that further action is necessary to bring them back to the negotiating table. Between now and 26 January we hope that the company will reflect on the

decision, and meet the trade unions with a view to reaching a negotiated settlement."

Land Rover, which is owned by Ford, has offered its employees a pay increase of 6.5 percent over two years.

University lectures in the UK to ballot for strike over pay

University lecturers in the UK are to be balloted for national strike action this week in pursuit of their demand for a higher salary. The Association of University Teachers (AUT) is balloting its 47,000 academics and support staff members who are employed in universities throughout the UK. The union claims that wages in the sector have fallen by 40 percent compared with the rest of the workforce.

The starting salary of a fully qualified lecturer is just £23,000. A recent survey of the public found that 79 percent said this should be £32,000.

Israeli bank workers threaten to strike action

Workers at Machish, United Mizrahi Bank's computer and ATM subsidiary in Israel, are threatening to strike, according to workers representative Zohar Madar.

The dispute was instigated by Mizrahi's growing use of outsourcing. Machish staff have demanded that the bank sign an agreement to limit the use of external contractors, in order to safeguard the 300 Machish workers' jobs. The legal requirement, according to Israeli labour law, of 14 days notice after declaring an industrial dispute has now passed, and the workers are therefore able to go ahead with their strike threat.

In 2003, a pact was signed between workers at Machish, United Mizrahi and Tefahot Mortgage Bank, in which the three agreed to support each other's actions, including taking sympathy strike action.

Egyptian migrant workers riot over conditions in Kuwait

Over 3,000 Egyptian migrant workers in Kuwait were rounded up by police and packed off to desert internment camps at the end of last month, following two days of street troubles on October 30-31.

The conflict took place in the Khaitan region, 20 kilometres south of the capital, where 60,000 Egyptian workers live in generally crowded living quarters. The region is a shantytown made up of migrant workers from different countries.

The riots were apparently sparked by an incident in which an Egyptian broke a plate in a shop owned by a Bangladeshi and refused to pay for it. The two men exchanged words and the police were called. The arrest of the Egyptian led to rioting by other Egyptians. But the heavy-handed crackdown, in which 120 people

were injured, lasted for two days, widening the circle of rioters and angering many of the 274,000 Egyptians in Kuwait.

The authorities rounded up more than 3,000 Egyptians and packed them off to camps in the desert.

Of Kuwait's total population of 2.2 million, almost 1.4 million are foreign workers. Many of the Egyptian workers arrived after the Gulf War in 1991, following Kuwait's expulsion of 400,000 Palestinian and Jordanian workers. The workers' admission to Kuwait was seen as part of Egypt's reward for its support for the war against Iraq and the resulting "liberation of Kuwait", which included a pledge by the emirate and other Gulf States to spend US\$15 billion on development projects.

The promised funding has failed to come through, and many Egyptian workers seeking jobs in Kuwait have fallen victim to fraud by their sponsors and employers. Many are unskilled workers, who were forced to sell their lands and property in rural Egypt to pay agents who promised to find them jobs, only to find out on arrival either that there are no jobs or that working conditions are intolerable.

Africa

Zimbabwean traffic controllers sacked

More than 40 air traffic controllers employed by the Civil Aviation Authority of Zimbabwe (CAAZ) have been sacked for taking strike action to demand higher pay.

The strikers, who began their strike on November 21 2003, have all been sent letters of dismissal by the acting director of Air Navigation Services for CAAZ, Ezra Mazambara. The *Standard* of January 12 reported that the letter accuses the strikers of breaking the CAAZ code of conduct. The letter reads, "I regret to advise you that the committee found you guilty of contravening paragraph 2 and 20 of schedule 111 of the CAAZ code of conduct and resolved that you should be dismissed from CAAZ from the date you last reported for duty."

According to the *Standard*, paragraph 2 of the code of conduct states that workers who do not show up for duty for five or more days without specifying reasons risk dismissal, and paragraph 20 states that negligent activity on duty attracts a penalty of expulsion.

The company has hired a team of Zambian technicians to man airports, alongside the Air Force personnel who have been drafted in to keep the planes flying and break the air traffic controllers' strike.

A spokesman for the strikers claimed that most of the Zambian "so-called aviation experts" had been out of duty for over five years. He said they were being paid US\$100 a day and provided with free accommodation—fully furnished houses—for the time they are in Zimbabwe.

CAAZ chairman Charles Samuriwo has claimed the strike is illegal because, under Zimbabwe's labour laws, air traffic control is designated an essential service and strikes are forbidden.

Tawanda Mukarati, the acting chairman of the Air Traffic Controllers' Association of Zimbabwe, said they would contest the dismissals in court. "We feel their action [of the CAAZ] was not above board. They did not properly investigate the cases, and do not have the minutes of the disciplinary hearings... we feel grossly abused."

There are growing fears about the security of the skies over Zimbabwe.

Namibia: Striking Chinese migrant workers win concessions

Angry Chinese migrant workers gathered outside the offices of the Ramatex Textile Factory, on the outskirts of Windhoek in Namibia, on January 9. The police were called and one female employee had to receive medical treatment after a dog used by security guards attacked her.

More than 800 Chinese workers had been on strike on the two previous days against poor conditions of employment. They complained that medical fees were being deducted from their salaries and that canteen food was inedible, and demanded that they should be allowed to return home to celebrate the Chinese New Year on January 22. They were also protesting against the possibility that two workers were to be sent back to China for instigating the strike.

Management at the factory have agreed to pay all medical costs except those incurred for pregnancy or the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases. They have agreed to reduce the length of the contract from three years to two. They have also agreed to set up separate canteens for Chinese and Filipino workers from next month. In addition the workers have been told that anyone wishing to return to China for the New Year will get 26 days unpaid leave to make the visit.

Despite the concessions many of the Chinese workers want to return home for good. The passports belonging to the Chinese workers are held by management, supposedly for "safe keeping".

250 Nigerian university lecturers threatened with the sack

Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, has threatened 250 university lecturers with the sack. They have been on strike for four months in support of a demand for higher salaries.

Dr. Usman Ladan, chairman of the ASUU (Academic Staff Union of Universities) at the university, has confirmed that the university authority has already issued the first batch of "pre-sack queries" to about 100 of the lecturers. He named Professor Yakubu Nasidi, Professor Aliyu Mohammed, Professor S. Y. Aku, Professor S.A.Nkom, Dr Bashir Kurfi and Dr Abdul Ganiyu Garba as some of the academics who have already received "queries".

Ladan said that the union has filed multiple lawsuits challenging the university as well as the school's council, senate and vice chancellor over the "queries" and other related issues.

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