

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

20 February 2004

Civil servants strike in England and Wales

On February 16, civil servants in England and Wales held the biggest civil service strike in 13 years. The industrial action is the outcome of a long running pay dispute with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

The stoppage involved up to 85,000 workers organised in several public sector workers unions including Unison and Public and Commercial Services (PCS), which announced that 80 to 90 percent of its members struck at job centres, benefits offices and other local authority services.

The strike followed a breakdown in talks between trade unions and the DWP, which has offered a pay rise below the level of inflation. The DWP claimed that nearly 90 percent of job centres were open. The PCS disputed this and said the strike had “massively disrupted” job centres and benefits offices, which could only operate with skeleton staff. PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka said, “It clearly demonstrates members’ anger at the levels of poverty pay and unequal salaries in the civil service.”

On February 17, driving examiners struck, leading to the cancellation of 5,000 driving tests. As with many civil servants, the examiners are on low rates of pay. A quarter of civil servants earn less than £13,750, with starting salaries in the Department of Work and Pensions as low as £9,900.

The strike coincides with a report that senior civil servants are to receive a nine percent pay increase, which could take some of the most highly paid officials’ salaries up to £300,000 per annum.

Radio France journalists end strike, Radio France International journalists continue

Radio France journalists ended their strike after 18 days on February 13. The journalists’ trade union representatives signed an agreement “to improve wages” before April 30. The trade unions agreed to a document with management foreseeing a 400 euro raise in the year 2005.

The minister of Communication and Culture is still refusing to accede to the equalisation of the wages of Radio France and France Television workers. The journalists, who took part in the strike, will not be paid for the 14 days they struck work.

Radio France Internationale (RFI) journalists are continuing to strike. The RFI is organisationally independent

of Radio France. On February 16, some 85 percent of an assembly voted to go on striking.

Air traffic controllers strike in France

On the morning of February 16, a strike of French air controllers began. Some 60 percent of the flights at Orly, Roissy and Bourget airports were cancelled. All staff participated in the action. The controllers at the Athis-Mons centre that controls the Paris region also decided to join the movement for 48 hours.

Trade unions denounced a plan to reorganise the services that will create a single control centre for a radius of 150 km around Orly, Roissy and Le Bourget. The unions said the government had done no research regarding the technical, ecological and social consequences of the project.

Spanish dockyard workers attacked by police

On February 18, 14,000 dockworkers protested in Spanish cities in pursuit of new contracts and to oppose job losses. The workers are employed by Izar, the country’s largest naval construction company. During the course of the protests there were several clashes with the police who attacked the demonstrations. This week in Seville, 38 workers were assaulted according to trade unions and 12 police officers injured.

The violence began when police squads entered the Izar shipyard. Police then fired rubber bullets and tear gas at 300 protesters. Trade unions representing the workers are demanding that Izar does not close down any of its yards or shed jobs in the next few years.

Nursery nurses in Scotland to strike

Nursery nurses in Scotland voted this week by a large majority for indefinite strike action in a pay dispute of more than two years duration. The nurses, members of the public sector trade union Unison, are campaigning in support of a national regrading claim. Staff voted by 81 percent in favour of industrial action. Their pay hasn’t been reviewed for 15 years, with basic grade nursery nurse earning just £10,000 a year.

Irish train and bus drivers hold industrial action in Ireland

Train and bus workers throughout Ireland held a four-hour strike on February 17 to protest government plans to break up the state-owned transportation company, Coras Iompair

Eireann (CIE). The action resulted in thousands of commuters being stranded and having to resort to other forms of transport.

The transport strike was called by two of the country's major transport unions. The government condemned the strike and warned that privatisation would create a situation whereby workers were also unable to strike as one unit. Deputy Prime Minister Mary Harney said of the industrial action, "What's happening today indicates how important competition is."

Irish doctors protest

On February 17 doctors in Ireland refused to perform about 100 non-emergency operations. This was part of a protest against changes being planned by the government to their malpractice insurance. Doctors are calling on the government to insure them immediately against malpractice claims for operations carried out before 2004.

Recently the government ended its contract with its provider and is now negotiating with the old insurer, Medical Defence Union. The Medical Defence Union has offered the government about \$77 million to relinquish its commitment to cover pre-2004 claims. The government disputes this, claiming that the liability is closer to \$515 million.

Zambian unions hold one-day strike and demonstration

The Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and Federation for Free Trade Unions of Zambia (FFTUZ) received permission to hold a peaceful demonstration to the parliament buildings on February 18. Earlier in the week the police had denied the unions a permit to demonstrate, citing a lack of manpower needed to police the demonstration, and had threatened that anyone demonstrating would face the consequences.

ZCTU president Leonard Hikaumba said the unions wanted to sit down with the government to negotiate over working conditions in the spirit of "give and take".

The first national strike in Zambia for 16 years was called in opposition to high taxes and a wage freeze imposed on civil servants. The freeze was part of a government attempt to improve confidence among foreign donors by holding down public spending.

The Mineworkers Union of Zambia (MUZ) said that it would not recommend that its members participate in the nationwide strike. President Andrew Mwanza said that the mining industry depended on its workforce working every day. Even so, up to half a million workers were expected to take part in the strike.

Transport workers to strike in South Africa

On Thursday February 19, at least 5,000 workers at Transnet, South Africa's main transport company, are due

to go on a one-day strike in solidarity with airport baggage handlers. The workers are all members of the South African Transport Workers Union (SATAWU).

The baggage handlers are employees of Equity Aviation, and have been on strike since December 18 last year. Transnet is the biggest shareholder in Equity Aviation, holding 49 percent of the company.

The strike is over wage demands and an increase in working hours made without compensation. SATAWU's demand is for a wage increase of eight percent, but Equity Aviation is offering six percent.

Nigeria hospital on strike

Workers at the Jos University Teaching Hospital (JUTH) have taken indefinite strike action over a 30 percent cut in their January salaries. The workers belong to the National Association of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives (NANNM), Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU), Medical and Health Workers Union of Nigeria (MHWUN) and Nigerian Union of Pharmacists Medical Technologists and Professions Allied to Medicine (NUPMTPAM). They are also protesting over non-payment of a 22 percent pay rise made by the federal government in 2001 to all civil servants in tertiary institutions. Management paid the increase for January to May in 2003 but have not paid it since then.

A union statement challenged the management over their reason given for the non-payment—that the Federal Ministry of Health has not released the funds—saying that in other teaching hospitals staff had been paid in full.

Zimbabwe lecturers continue strike

The University of Zimbabwe (UZ) opened this week for examinations to be held, but with temporary staff invigilating. Lecturers have said they will continue their strike action because the UZ management have refused to pay a 300 percent salary increase that was awarded under arbitration last year. "We have been locked in meetings since morning and have unanimously resolved not to report for work until our demands are met. I understand that the same applies for non-academic staff," said Mr James Mahlaule, secretary general of the Association of University Teachers (AUT).

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