

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

16 February 2007

## **French public sector employees strike against government cuts**

On February 8, French public sector workers took strike action and demonstrated in Paris and 20 other cities, including Marseilles, Toulouse, Metz and Nantes and Rennes. The workers were protesting government spending cuts and a proposed lower than inflation pay deal. The government of President Jacques Chirac also plans a possible 15,000 job losses in the public sector.

The public sector in France comprises some 5.5 million employees. The government claimed that about one fifth of the public sector workforce participated in the dispute.

The strike involved workers throughout the public sector, including teachers, tax collectors, post office staff and train drivers. According to the CGT trade union, up to 85,000 demonstrated in Paris. In Marseilles an estimated 5,000 people demonstrated, in Toulon 3,300, in Rennes up to 6,000 and up to 4,000 in Lyon.

The National Union of Secondary School Teachers stated that up to half of their membership supported the strike, leading to the closure of hundreds of schools. In Paris it was reported that 180 schools were closed.

On February 1, the government introduced a 0.8 percent pay deal. Over the past two decades real wages have fallen drastically. Public sector trade unions claim that their members' pay fell by 5 percent between 2000 and 2005. Teachers' trade unions state that since 1981 the real wage of their members has fallen by more than 20 percent.

France's public sector auditor, the Cour des comptes based in Paris, has demanded that the government continue to slash public spending in order to cut the budget deficit that stands at more than €1,100 billion. Philippe Séguin, president of the Cour des comptes, said last week, "If we want to stay the course, we must reinforce the movement with a more substantial effort of controlling public spending."

## **Auto workers strike at Ford plant in Russia**

Auto workers employed by Ford at the Vsevolozhsk plant near St. Peterburg in Russia struck for 24 hours on February 14. Up to 1,500 participated in the industrial action—remaining in the plant but not working—in an ongoing dispute over pay, holidays and social benefits.

The strike began when more than 1,000 workers voted overwhelmingly for a sit-in at the plant following a mass meeting on February 13. Workers are demanding that the company enter into a collective bargaining contract on wages, social guarantees and job security. The company is proposing a "final offer" wage increase of between 14 and 20 percent tied to increases in productivity. Annual inflation was as high as 9 percent last year.

Ford stated that a St. Petersburg regional court had declared the strike illegal, but that it was still willing to negotiate. Trade union leaders were involved in hours of talks with management during the strike and announced that the stoppage would cease at midnight. The interfax news agency reported that 500 workers had voted to suspend the strike.

According to an article in the *Kommersant* business newspaper, "German unions have stated that cars from German plants will not be used to undermine the strike in St. Petersburg, but have not mentioned how they will prevent that from happening."

The industrial action is estimated to have cost the auto company \$4 million. Ford is planning to increase production at the plant by 20 percent to 75,000 units this year. The plant assembles about 300 Ford Focus cars per day and produces about 60,000 vehicles per year. Last year it had total sales of 116,000 locally produced and imported vehicles in Russia.

The company faces increasing competition in the Leningrad region and St. Petersburg as General Motors, Nissan and Toyota are all moving to set up manufacturing plants in the area.

## **Care workers in Southampton England stage three-day strike**

Hundreds of care workers in Southampton, England staged a three-day strike beginning February 3. The workers are members of UNISON and the TGWU.

The council has threatened to sack the 249 workers on February 18 unless they accept pay cuts. It aims to cut the total wage bill of its care staff by £420,000 per annum. The proposed pay cuts have ranged from £1,250 to £7,000 a year. Prior to the industrial action, staff had twice voted against the plans to cut the salary budget.

## **BBC staff set to strike**

Thousands of employees of the BBC are set to strike on February 26 to protest job cuts. The action was announced last week by the broadcasting trade union BECTU and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ). A strike would possibly disrupt the output of TV news programmes.

The BBC plans to implement 10 compulsory redundancies among journalists and broadcasting staff as part of its overall plan to carry out efficiency savings. It said in a statement that it “remains committed to trying to achieve these savings without the need for compulsory redundancies and we are still in discussions with BECTU and the NUJ about how this might be achieved.”

BECTU said that the initial redundancies were “madness,” as the BBC had already cut almost 4,000 jobs through voluntary measures.

The union is also involved in another dispute with the BBC. On February 27, up to 95 of its members are to take action for 72 hours in a dispute over working practices in news production.

#### **Zimbabwean doctors dismissed for going on strike**

More than 80 of the striking doctors in Zimbabwe have been dismissed at Harare Hospital in the capital city. Both junior and senior doctors have been sent dismissal notices by management. Ten doctors had been dismissed previously for taking part in the strike, although it is not clear whether the dismissals have since been rescinded.

Health Minister David Parirenyatwa stated publicly that striking doctors would not lose their jobs, but then left for a week on holiday and handed over his responsibilities to the defence minister.

The doctors’ demands include an increase in their monthly salaries. The strike by junior doctors began in December, and was joined later by senior doctors and some nurses.

Meanwhile, striking teachers in Zimbabwe have accused the government of using the police and security agents to intimidate them. Officials of the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) say that police officers and agents of the Central Intelligence Organization are entering the schools to confront teachers and interrogate them. As with the doctors, teachers are threatened with losing their jobs but say that their salaries are so low that they may as well be unemployed.

Police in south-central Masvingo detained PTUZ President Takavafira Zhou and subjected him to questioning, releasing him only after his lawyer intervened.

#### **Sierra Leonean university staff on strike to oppose pay cut**

Lecturers and other staff belonging to the All Staff Association at Fourah Bay College (ASA-FBC—part of the University of Sierra Leone, Freetown) began strike action

Monday, February 12. They took action after staff had a 200,000 leone (\$US68) reduction in their take-home pay. The University of Sierra Leone is the oldest university in West Africa.

The strike action coincides with second semester exams and on February 13 led to a temporary stoppage. In a similar action in 2005 the ASA staff received support from the students, who took to the streets in protest.

#### **South African waste removal workers strike, build barricades**

On Friday, February 9, striking workers at a waste removal facility in Tembisa in the East Rand clashed with police, who fired rubber bullets. The workers had erected street barricades. On temporary contracts, they took action when they were not signed up as permanent employees by the Council.

#### **South African mine managers injure seven pickets in bid to break strike**

Seven pickets at the Modikwa platinum mine in South Africa were knocked down by vehicles driven by managers. This was the result of three separate incidents, according to National Union of Mineworkers of South Africa negotiator Onis Serotoane. Five of the injured workers received treatment and were later released, while two others remain at the Polokwane provincial hospital.

The spokesperson for Anglo Platinum (Angloplat) justified the violence against workers by saying that they were blocking the road when they were hit. Managers have used the courts to obtain a ruling that pickets must get no closer than 200 meters from the mine gate.

Management are intent on boosting profits by introducing continuous operation and forcing miners to work on Sundays for no extra pay. The NUM has offered a compromise of working on Sundays for an extra 26 percent. The strike by around 3,000 miners has now lasted for more than three weeks, and the usual revenue of R5 million (US\$688,000) per day has stopped coming in.

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