

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

23 March 2007

Europe

Polish teachers demand better pay

More than 12,000 teachers demonstrated in the centre of the Polish capital Warsaw on March 19 to demand a better pay deal and to protest government education policies. They also called for the retention of early retirement benefits and for the dismissal of the minister and vice-minister of education.

The teachers want a 7 percent pay increase that was promised by Education Minister Roman Giertych, but only partly delivered. Teachers are low paid, with staff of more than two decades' seniority earning about €300 per month.

Giertych is the head of the right-wing Catholic League of Polish Families Party and is seeking to pass a law that would enable the firing of openly gay teachers or anyone who "promotes" homosexuality. Teachers' union representative Kalina Grzelak said this week, "We are going to use all the means to protect freedom and tolerance in Poland."

Tugboat workers in Rotterdam resume strike

On March 19, tugboat workers employed by Smit Harbour Towage at Rotterdam in Holland resumed industrial action. The workers are calling for an increased pay deal, an annual bonus and better pensions.

The action was suspended last week when a court ruled that workers could only strike for five days before they had to work again for at least four days. The FNV Bondgenoten trade union stated that the ruling allowed for a further strike of at least five days to go ahead.

A lawsuit had been brought by Rotterdam's oil refineries, which stated they would have had to shut down three refineries due to interrupted supplies of crude oil.

Rotterdam is the largest port in Europe, with an average of 85 ships entering and 85 leaving every 24 hours. The bigger ships using the port require tugboat assistance. A previous strike by the tugboat workers led to a number of ships being stranded, with others forced to use other ports

in Holland and Belgium.

Cabin staff strike at SAS Denmark airline

On March 21, cabin staff employed by SAS Denmark airline struck for several hours, leading to a number of early-morning cancellations and delays at Copenhagen's Kastrup Airport. The stoppage followed the failure by the cabin staff's trade union and management to agree a deal in negotiations the previous evening.

Southampton Council workers strike against privatisation plans

Care staff, social workers and housing benefits officers were among up to 2,000 employees of Southampton Council who took strike action on March 19. The strike was called to protest plans to transfer a number of customer service and back-office jobs to the private sector company Capita.

Under the proposals, Capita will be responsible for providing services including customer services, taxation and benefits, human resources and payroll at the council in Hampshire, England. On March 21, council staff demonstrated outside the offices of the council as a debate was talking place on the planned changes.

Strike suspended at Fujitsu in Manchester, England

The Amicus trade union representing workers at Fujitsu's Manchester site in northwest England cancelled a scheduled strike this week. The union stated that the strike, over trade union recognition, a pay deal and redundancy consultation, was being called off to allow further negotiations to take place.

Workers at the site have held 12 days of industrial action in the last four months. Last week, a group of local Members of Parliament wrote a letter to the firm offering to mediate in the dispute and called for a "swift resolution." Fujitsu is a major supplier of government IT services with several contracts, including the National Health Service.

Ground staff strike at Cyprus Airways

On March 16, Cyprus Airways' ground staff staged a

two-hour strike to protest a decision by its former charter arm Eurocypria to hand over customer services to a private company. The action began at 6:00 a.m. local time and involved some 180 employees.

The stoppage affected at least three Cyprus Airways flights, two at the western Paphos Airport and a third at the southeastern base of Larnaca Airport, according to the Cyprus News Agency. Another flight from Larnaca to Dubai departed two hours behind schedule.

Earlier this month, the European Commission gave the go-ahead to the restructuring plan proposed by the Cypriot government to restore the profitability and survival of Cyprus Airways. In late 2006, Cyprus Airways sold Eurocypria to the government, supposedly to ensure that the island would have an airline if Cyprus Airways were to close.

Middle East

Successful general strike in Israel

A general strike by public service workers ended Wednesday, March 21, after just eight hours, when the Israeli government was forced to agree to payment of back wages. Many local authorities and city administrations have not paid wages for months and are effectively bankrupt.

A Histadrut spokesman said that as many as 150,000 workers were involved. Much of the country was paralysed, including government offices, and utilities were run by a skeleton staff. The strike affected air and seaports, railways, postal services and the stock exchange. Airports would have been much more badly hit had the strike continued.

The Kadima-led coalition government with Labour is seeking to push through major public spending cuts, and the defeat inflicted against it is due to the widespread anger such austerity measures have provoked. The strike is estimated to have cost the economy US\$200 million.

Africa

Court workers on strike in Nigeria

Legal staff in several parts of Nigeria have declared an indefinite strike to demand implementation of an agreement made with the federal government in 2005.

The issues covered in the agreement, which have not been fully addressed two years later, include salary levels and grading structure and the lack of an integrated scheme of service. Those on strike belong to the Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria (JUSUN).

A lawyer, Mr. Emeka Asogwa, stated in the *Tide Online*, "These are dedicated workers, who come to work from morning till evening, Monday through Friday, and this

strike will cripple the judiciary since it is indefinite."

The court buildings in Lagos (the commercial capital), Oyo State and Enugu State were all under lock and key.

Teachers union calls off strike in South Africa

Teachers belonging to the South African Democratic Teachers' Union have been told to stop their strike action and accompanying protests, such as sit-ins and pickets.

The teachers are protesting poor sanitation and water supplies for rural schools, lack of salary notices, overcrowding, lack of support staff and non-payment of "section 21 backlogs" (government money for non-state schools).

Whilst declaring that the issue of the "section 21" payments was serious, and driving disadvantaged schools into desperation, SADATU chairperson Mxolisi Bomvana said that he had "confidence that concerns raised will be addressed" without the need for any further action.

Bus drivers on strike in South Africa

South African bus drivers working for Putco, Greyhound, Buscor and Megabus are expected to begin a nationwide strike after talks between management and unions broke down. The unions are demanding a pay increase of 13 percent for all employees, while the bus companies are offering 5 percent.

A two-week strike by bus workers at Autopax, which runs a fleet of 240 buses, has only just been called off.

The dispute at Metrobus is still going on after more than one month. The bitter dispute is over changes in the drivers' contract on unused sick leave, as well as reinstatement of those who have been dismissed. Three working drivers have been killed since the start of the strike, although it has not yet been established whether their deaths were linked to their role in the dispute.

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