

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

23 November 2007

Europe

Finnish pharmacists strike over wage increase

A strike by Finnish pharmacists and dispensers began November 18, after negotiations broke down. The pharmacists' union is demanding a wage increase of 17 percent, or an average rise of €500 a month. As employers are using nonunion employees and management in as many pharmacies as possible, the strike will mainly affect smaller concerns. If an agreement is not reached, the union is threatening to expand the strike this week.

Northern Ireland's hospital workers in dispute

Hospital workers in Londonderry have walked out in a dispute over their workloads.

The BBC reported November 19 that more than 70 medical secretaries were involved in strike action at Altnagelvin Hospital. NIPSA, the largest trade union, said the action was over a ban on overtime.

Northern Ireland's classroom assistants resume strike

School classroom assistants across Northern Ireland returned to the picket line November 19. In the second of a series of two-day strikes due to last until at least Christmas, the workers are protesting over pay and conditions.

Classroom assistants have apologised to parents for the disruption caused, but have made clear their determination to continue with the action. In October, a 10-day strike by classroom assistants shut down over half of special schools.

National Health Service maintenance workers in England continue strike action

Industrial action involving maintenance craft workers at Doncaster and Bassetlaw Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust continued November 19.

The strike has resulted from the Trust's refusal to implement a recruitment and retention plan as part of a national pay agreement, which amounts to around £3,000 per year. The decision of the Trust comes despite members of the NHS Employers Group recognising that the recruitment and retention premia are a contractual obligation.

In April, the Unite trade union won a tribunal on behalf of four members against Newcastle NHS Foundation Trust, which had sought to opt out of the premium. The Tribunal confirmed that the four members were entitled to the premium.

UK bus drivers to strike over falling pay

Over 1,200 bus drivers at the transnational Stagecoach in Manchester will start six days of strike action in protest at a pay deal that leaves them falling behind the Manchester "market rate."

Strikes are planned for the November 27 and 29, and then December 1, 3, 5 and 12 for services operating out of Princess Road, Hyde Road, Stockport and Glossop.

The drivers, members of the union Unite, currently earn nearly 15 percent less than other Manchester operators. They have been offered a rise that will not close the gap fast enough, according to union leaders. The drivers had rejected a deal worth an extra 50 pence an hour for 15 months followed by a further 50 pence an hour for the next 15 months.

Slovenia workers hold mass demonstration for better pay

On November 17, tens of thousands of Slovenian workers protested in the capital, Ljubljana, for better pay and more social justice. It was the largest demonstration in the country since its formal independence in 1991.

The demonstration, which was estimated at 70,000, was joined by student groups and pensioners' organisations after employers refused to raise salaries by 3.5 percent.

An inflation rate of 5.1 percent—the highest in the euro-zone—has also been a cause of tensions, as unions accuse managers of having "reaped all the benefits" from Slovenia's economic growth of more than 6 percent—also the highest in the euro zone.

The minimal monthly wage in Slovenia is €540 (\$790), with average monthly pay at €1,260 (\$1,839) gross.

Unions have threatened a strike in January if the issue is not resolved.

Middle East

Thousands rally in Tel Aviv in support of teachers' strike

On November 17, an estimated 70,000 gathered at Rabin Square in Tel Aviv in solidarity with the ongoing teachers' strike that has entered its fifth week.

The secondary school teachers are demanding higher wages and better working conditions. According to *Ha'aretz*, many of the demonstrators were children there to support their teachers.

During the rally, teachers waved signs reading, "The education system is bleeding, and the government is in a coma."

The chairman of the Middle and High School Teachers' Association, Ran Erez, said, "I did not believe the square would be filled with a 100,000 people. We are embarking on a social struggle for a welfare state."

Histadrut declares official disputes in Israil and Haifa port

On November 18, the Histadrut Labour Federation declared a labour dispute in the Israil airline. The dispute results from flight attendants' protests against their working conditions.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, the Israil employees' complaints include an alleged failure by the company to pay the minimum wage, being forced to sleep on the floor of the aircraft, and to pay the costs of their own training.

The flight attendants are demanding a collective employment contract in place of the current individual agreement on which they are signed.

Israil flight attendants are currently paid only for the hours they spend in the air and not those they spend preparing and cleaning the plane before and after flights. A statement by the workers' committee said, "Our current contract as it exists does not define working hours or resting hours and it leads to situations where we are forced to work for 16 straight hours, given a four-hour break and then forced to work another transatlantic flight back to Israel."

If no agreement is reached within 14 days, the airline workers could take industrial action.

The following day, Histadrut declared a labour dispute at Haifa port. If

agreement cannot be reached, a strike will be staged at the port from November 29.

Workers strike in West Bank factory

Ninety Palestinian workers at the Sol-Or factory in the West Bank took unlimited strike action last week. The Sol-Or factory, which is located in the Nitzanei Oz industrial zone, near Tul Karm, manufactures and markets gas and petrol containers.

The workers cite dangerous working conditions and low wages as reasons for their strike. Muhammad Baladi, the acting head of the impromptu union formed by the striking employees, said, "The working conditions are unbearable. We earn between 60 and 150 shekels per day, and most of us earn less than 80 shekels per day. We have no insurance and are working in unsafe conditions. Up to now three employees died in work related accidents in the plant." Workers at the factory are demanding the Israeli minimum wage—as required by law—improvements to working conditions and insurance. They claim that they wrote a letter to management, but rather than deal with the issues management chose to fire the worker who signed the letter. The factory is part of the Sol-Or group, a private holding company that owns additional factories and provides various services.

Africa

South African farm workers protest lack of safety

Hundreds of farm workers from six provinces around Cape Town gathered in Paarl, in the Western Cape of South Africa, to protest against a lack of safety that has resulted in the deaths of 18 farm workers in less than a week. They were also protesting against lack of schools and clinics and the terrible conditions in which they are forced to live.

On November 9, 10 seasonal farm workers were killed when a bus taking them home crashed outside Piketberg. Four days later, on November 13, eight farm workers were killed after being thrown from the back of an open truck when one of its tires burst. The truck was carrying around 70 workers—most of them standing.

The marches, which were organized by the Food and Allied Workers' Union (FAWU), were also held in Upington, Ficksburg, Groblersdal, Rustenburg and Port Elizabeth.

Protesters held placards bearing slogans such as "We want our rights," "We feed the nation, but our children suffer from hunger" and "The farmer's pets are fed better than we are." They also sang songs condemning the farm owners and the government.

Roselin Graaf, a farm worker, traveled from De Doorns to attend the march. She said she was there to fight for her rights—she had been working on a farm for eight years without receiving any increase in pay.

Abie Daniels, provincial general secretary of FAWU, told *Cape Argus* that workers were forced to work in "horrible" conditions, faced eviction if they lost their job, and had limited or no access to social services, clinics and schools. "Farmers no longer care about their workers," he said. "The farm workers don't know their rights. They have nowhere to go and are often paid much less than the minimum wage."

He pointed out that the farmers provide transport for their workers, who have been evicted from the farms and are forced to live in shantytowns some distance away. He said, "People get fined for not wearing their seat-belts, while no rules and regulations are in place for farmers who transport over 70 workers in the back of a truck."

Algerian railway workers stop services to and from capital

Algerian railway workers in the capital city of Algiers have gone on indefinite strike to demand extra payments for the daily hazards they face in their job. At present, the hazard pay is 15 AD (US\$0.225) per day.

The strike has stopped four of the railway lines connecting Algiers to other major cities, including al Afroun, Chlef and Bordj-Bou-Argeridj.

The workers face many hazards, including terrorist attacks and accidents. They say that a government statute should guarantee them 500 AD (US\$7.52) per month—much more than they actually receive. Some

reports say that the strike is likely to be extended across the country.

Unemployed protest in Southern Algeria

Following a November 17 protest led by hundreds of unemployed workers against both directors of Regional and Provincial Employment Agency in Hassi Messaoud and Ourgla southern Algeria, the areas were surrounded by security services.

Twenty-seven protesters were later reported to have been arrested by an "authorised source," according to *El Khabar*.

Nigerian medical lab scientists strike over mismanagement

On November 12, scientists from the Medical Laboratory at the University of Calaba Teaching Hospital (UCTH) in Nigeria took indefinite strike action to protest against the appointment of medical doctors to head the laboratory unit, as well as other issues.

The hospital's normal activities were brought to a standstill shortly afterwards because test results, on which the hospital depends, were not being produced. The strike was still ongoing one week later.

The lab scientists explained that they were unhappy about the impact of the strike on patients at UCTH, but that the strike was a last resort after numerous attempts to resolve the issues through dialogue with the management had failed.

Some of the executive members told the press that it was unacceptable to ask lab scientists, from a distinct professional discipline, to report to a professional from a different field of expertise. They added the government act which established the council of laboratory scientists, as amended in 2003, states that the "administration and headship of the laboratory rests on the shoulders of the chief medical laboratory scientist."

Ugandan health workers go on strike to protest non-payment of salaries

Over 100 health workers in the Moyo district of Uganda have taken strike action to protest the non-payment of their salaries for June. They demonstrated outside the office of the acting chief administrative officer, demanding to know the reason for them not being paid their salary from five months ago.

Clinical officer Newton Iya is acting as a spokesperson for the strikers. He told the *New Vision* newspaper, "We have decided to go on a sit-down strike until our June salary is paid.... We were given pay-slips without money. We, who are carrying the burden, are neglected.... They have paid the doctors, the senior nursing officer and the principal nursing officer."

The workers also accused the district personnel officer, Jane Mania, of allegedly referring to them as "frustrated, malnourished workers, who are disturbing her office for only a month's salary."

Hospital officials blamed the ministry for only supplying half the funds needed to pay the salaries. They said the arrears would be paid before Christmas.

Month-long strike at Tanzanian gold mine

Miners at Tanzania's Bulyanhulu gold mine have been on strike since October 25. The strikers, who belong to Tanzania Mines and Construction Workers Union (TAMICO), are demanding that their grievances on pay, health and risk allowances be addressed.

The mine is owned by the Barrick Gold Corporation of Canada, the world's leading gold producer. When the strike began over half of the company's 1,971 workforce walked off the job in what the company claims was an illegal action. According to *Reuters*, the company stated that TAMICO had called the action without informing management, and despite having reached a mediated agreement with the company on terms for labour discussions.

TAMICO disputes this and insists that it has followed all procedures in calling the action. The union has filed an injunction at the Dar es Salaam labour court to prevent Barrick from hiring new workers. However, the court postponed its decision till November 26, giving Barrack time to file a counter affidavit.

Teweli K. Teweli, spokesman for Barrick, told Reuters that production, which had been reduced to 20 percent at the beginning of the strike, had now reached 60 percent, although he refused to confirm how much gold was actually being produced. He claimed that production was being carried out by 325 workers, who had been fired for participating in the strike and had now been rehired after applying for their jobs, in addition to the 766 workers who did not take strike action and 848 contractors.

Barrick Gold Corp owns three gold mines in Tanzania and is developing a fourth.

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