

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

30 November 2007

## Europe

### Railway workers' strike and protests shut down Hungarian capital

On November 21, railway workers staged a six-hour strike in Budapest, affecting local and international rail traffic. Bus drivers, teachers and electricity workers joined the protest.

Railway workers were striking against the closure of 38 regional railway lines. Other sections of workers were protesting against government plans to privatise parts of the health and pension systems.

The railway strike affected over 1,000 trains and followed on from previous two-hour warning strikes. Some schools were also closed, workers walked out briefly at Budapest's international airport, and many bus services were cancelled for two hours.

The government has said its privatisation plans are part of efforts to cut the national budget deficit of 9.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP)—the highest in the European Union.

Opponents, including the Hungarian Chamber of Doctors, say private health insurers, by seeking to make profits in the sector, would break with a long-standing tradition of "social solidarity" and would leave the poorest and those already suffering from health problems without adequate coverage.

Around 10,000 workers and anti-government protesters later rallied outside Hungary's parliament against the economic policies of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany.

### BBC staff ballot to strike over job cuts

Representatives of unions in the British Broadcasting Corporation—BECTU, NUJ, and Unite—met in London on November 22 and voted to ballot for national strike action against compulsory redundancies.

The meeting followed a BBC-wide "day of action" on November 5, with meetings and pavement gatherings at buildings across the UK.

Representatives heard that talks had been held earlier in the week with BBC Vision and BBC News over Director General Mark Thompson's proposals to slash a total of 2,500 jobs across the corporation announced on October 18.

According to the BBC, unions were informed that 343 staff had volunteered for redundancy in News, and 303 staff in Vision. The BBC's target for cuts was 328 in News and 440 in Vision. Management has said that they would not guarantee that those who have come forward as volunteers would be allowed to go.

Further compulsory redundancies are threatened in BBC Scotland and other parts of the corporation, including the World Service, and the Thompson cuts plan also affects Nations & Regions, Future Media & Technology, and Audio & Music.

On top of the 2,500 job cuts, the BBC plans to withhold unpredictability allowances (UPA) from new staff from January 2008 and implement changes to the pension scheme from April 2010.

Ballot papers will go out to members after November 30 for voting by January 9, 2008. If members vote to strike, industrial action could take place seven days after this.

### Glasgow National Health Service workers in possible strike

Members of the union Unison have voted overwhelmingly for industrial action in a consultative ballot over contentious hospital parking charges proposed by the senior health manager in Glasgow.

Employees voting included nurses, porters, cleaners and office workers, who say they can't afford the charges they face after failing to be allocated parking permits.

Matt McLaughlin, the union's regional officer for health, said three separate attempts to meet health board chief executive Tom Divers have been snubbed, making industrial action more likely. "Mr. Divers is sleepwalking into a strike by refusing to talk to staff and their representatives. Many of our members face real hardships following what is effectively a cut in their wages. And for many staff public transport is simply not a realistic option," said McLaughlin.

### Dutch school children strike spread via MSN

On November 23, an anonymous call to action spread by MSN, email, social network site Hyves and other web sites led to at least 37 demonstrations by secondary school children across the Netherlands.

The children protested against the obligation to have 1,040 hours of school per year, which they claim leads to schools giving them pointless assignments.

One message read: "Today, Friday, strike after the short break. Everybody participates, so you will too!"

In Amsterdam, over a thousand children participated.

In other cities, where several hundred children were involved, there were complaints that police had indiscriminately attacked the protests with truncheons. The National School Children Action Committee (LAKS) has filed a complaint with the Middelburg Police against the attacks on the protesting school children.

### Wildcat strike by Polish bus drivers

On November 22, bus drivers in Poland held a one-day wildcat strike against the appointment of a new director who wants the workers to purchase the company.

The strike was held in the bus company PKS-Lomza. Around 200 of the 250 workers there went on strike (50 workers who are part of the Solidarity union supported the plan for a "workers' buyout").

Authorities had first intended to sell PKS to the French company Connex, which has bought bus companies in other towns around Poland. When the workers opposed this with strike action, it was halted.

In June 2006, workers voted in a referendum to form a "workers' company," but many reversed their position when they learned of the financial conditions. A single share would cost 5,000 zloties (about US\$2,000). Many workers are paid only 1,000 zloties a month.

The workers would then have to take a bank loan and pay off the value of the assets. The amount they would need to pay for the assets is 6.6 million zloties. For 250 workers, that totals around 26,000 zloties each, over US\$10,000.

### Demonstration at crashed Irish haulage firm

Angry workers resumed their picket November 25 of Reid Transport's

main depot in Cloughmills, County Antrim. Meanwhile, the police have been asked to investigate working practices at the Northern Ireland haulage firm that crashed last week.

Around 200 workers lost their jobs after the company went into administration. The workers said they intended to picket the depot until they get the wages they are owed.

Initially it seemed that not everyone would get redundancy payments. Those under 18 years of age, those with less than two years' service and workers without national insurance numbers would all lose out. It was reported that workers were taking 24-hour shifts to blockade the premises. While they are letting accountants in to inspect the books they are not letting any assets off the premises. The BBC reported November 26 that children as young as 14 were working night shifts at Reid Transport. North Antrim assembly member Daithi McKay of Sinn Fein said sacked workers on the picket line told him some employees had been working more than 70 hours a week.

#### **Low-paid Irish school bus drivers on strike**

The bus drivers union SIPTU has served strike notice on Bus Eireann for over 200 low-paid school bus drivers demanding better pay and conditions.

The drivers currently earn €11.66 per hour. They have no pension, sick pay or other benefits. They are amongst the lowest paid workers in the public transport or education sectors. The first one-day stoppage is planned for November 30.

#### **Classroom assistants in Northern Ireland strike again**

On November 26, classroom assistants belonging to the NIPSA union are set to go on strike again.

Three other unions voted to accept an offer from employers. More than three-quarters of them voted to accept the deal on offer, which adds an extra £15 million to compensate for changes in work conditions.

NIPSA's 3,000 classroom assistants are to strike every Tuesday and Friday, at least until Christmas.

#### **Staff at UK government's largest department vote to strike over pay**

Civil servants working at the government's biggest department have voted to go on strike in a pay dispute.

The proposed action by up to 80,000 employees at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) would affect Jobcentres, pension payments and child support.

Spokesmen for the Public and Commercial Services Union said that of the 33 percent of members who voted in the ballot, 62 percent backed a strike.

The move was in protest at government plans to impose a three-year pay offer.

Union leaders have not said what form the strike might take, although it did say that a two-day stoppage is an option. The union claimed that around 40 percent of workers at the DWP will not receive a pay rise next year, while the offer averages just 1 percent a year for three years.

Union leaders have written to Work and Pensions Secretary Peter Hain to urge him to intervene in the dispute to avert strikes.

Workers at the department have staged a series of strikes already this year. A group of disabled workers, employed by Remploy, are also involved in the dispute. They staged a sit-in at the head office of the government department in central London in protest at the threat facing Remploy factories, which provide jobs for disabled people.

#### **Middle East**

##### **Thousands of Egyptian tax workers stage sit-in**

According to *Al-Ahram*, 55,000 property tax workers will stage a nationwide sit-in on December 3.

The dispute has been escalating since September. The workers are demanding parity with tax workers on the Ministry of Finance's payroll, and have staged three sit-ins so far, the latest on November 13 and 14 at

the headquarters of the Egyptian Federation of Trade Unions (EFTU) in central Cairo.

Strikers attending the Cairo sit-in said the main body of tax workers, whose salaries are paid directly out of the ministerial budget, earn between five and ten times more a month than their co-workers in the property tax sector. Exclusion from the ministry payroll is exacerbated by the fact that the taxes the workers collect are returned to the ministry.

In September, 15,000 striking textile workers at Al-Mahala's forced the government to concede to their demands. In June, Al-Azhar school teachers went on strike to successfully press for improved working conditions.

##### **Egyptian university teachers protest over pay and conditions**

Teachers at Egyptian universities and scientific research centres demonstrated on the Al-Azhar University campus on November 21. They were opposing the government's lack of response to their demands: for an end to security interference in their affairs, a salary increase and the reversal of laws removing tenure from teachers over 70 and stopping them from supervising post-graduate theses or doing research.

The demonstration was the second in two weeks. On November 5, 150 university professors stood for an hour to mourn their loss of professional dignity. According to an article in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, the security apparatus constantly interferes in university affairs—university chairmen and other staff cannot be appointed without security approval. University professors are forced to survive on salaries of at most LE3,000 (US\$547) per month.

#### **Africa**

##### **Cameroonian civil servants told any strike will be declared illegal**

The Cameroonian Minister of Labour and Social Security, Robert Nkili, has declared that the strike due on November 28 is illegal.

While he cited specific points, such as his not having been officially informed by the "Centrale Syndicale du secteur public" (CSP), he also said that it was illegal for civil servants to join trade unions. This would mean that any strike by civil servants would also be illegal, regardless of the specific circumstances.

The strike was intended to cover all civil servants and last for two days. At the time of writing, it is not yet clear whether the strike has gone ahead in defiance of the government declaration.

The CSP President Jean Marc Bikolo said that Cameroonian civil servants have suffered a 70 percent cut in salaries since 1992. The CSP is asking for an increase of 30 percent.

##### **Liberian schoolteachers strike to demand 10 months of pay arrears**

Teachers at 23 schools in the Liberian capital Monrovia have gone out on strike to demand payment of 10 months of salary arrears. They are also demanding an improved salary structure, a pay increase and other benefits. The affected schools are part of the Monrovia Consolidated School System (MCSS).

The representative of the public school teachers, Nathan Suah, commented: "The salary structure is ugly, and we want an immediate readjustment." He said in the current budget period (2007-2008), the government had claimed that the lowest paid civil servants would receive US\$55 per month, but this has not happened.

In reporting on this latest strike, the *Analyst* said, "The Ellen-led administration is plagued by incessant strike actions for salaries and other benefits by former and present civil servants."

##### **Construction workers strike at football World Cup stadium**

Around 1,000 South African construction workers at the 2010 FIFA World Cup stadium in Nelspruit are taking strike action to oppose "unbearable" working conditions and low pay. The workers are employed by the project's umbrella company, Mbombela Stadium Joint Venture. The opening of the 46,000-seat stadium will be delayed as a result.

A two-week strike at the Moses Mabhida stadium in Durban ended on November 20.

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