

# Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

27 June 2002

## **Spanish workers hold first general strike in eight years**

On June 20, the first general strike for eight years was held in Spain. The two major Spanish unions, the Workers Commissions and the General Union of Workers (UGT), called the 24-hour strike to protest welfare cuts, including draconian attacks on the unemployed. Legislation being proposed by the government will penalise the unemployed and includes proposals such as withdrawing benefits to those claimants who refuse three offers of jobs deemed acceptable within 30 kilometres (20 miles) of their homes.

The strike coincided with the opening of the latest summit of the European Union in Seville and hosted by the Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar. Millions of workers participated, with unions stating that 85 percent of their members were involved. Hundreds of thousands marched in all the main towns and cities to support the protest. In total around 90 marches and demonstrations were held nationwide.

The government deployed thousands of police officers in an attempt to intimidate strikers and in many locations, police escorted scabs into workplaces. The General Workers Federation said that police in riot gear attacked union members leaving its Madrid regional office. The workers were heading toward a picket line at a bus station when they were attacked and one striker was hit over the head.

In Barcelona up to 400,000 people demonstrated, while in Madrid 200,000 workers, youth and unemployed marched in support of the strike. In Seville, 100,000 participated in the march and demonstration.

Workers from all industries were involved in the strike, including airport staff, teachers, shop workers and civil service employees. The unions estimated that 95 percent of ground transport workers, including bus and underground railway staff, took part in the stoppage and 70 percent of air travel staff were involved. At Madrid airport, just 20 percent of flights went ahead as scheduled.

Nationwide TV and radio transmissions functioned as normal and newspapers were produced, but millions went

unsold as the majority of kiosks were closed.

## **Portuguese workers strike over labour law changes**

In Portugal thousands of employees took part in strikes and demonstrations on June 20 against plans by the government to introduce changes to the labour laws. More than thirty demonstrations were called to coincide with those in Spain. The largest protest was held in Lisbon when thousands marched to the parliament building.

## **Railway conductors in England continue strike in pay dispute**

Rail conductors employed by the Arriva Trains Northern rail company in northern England have announced a further 10 days of strike action in a long-running dispute over pay. The staff, members of the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT), have voted to strike for a further 24 hours on 10 separate days spread between the end of the month and New Year's Eve.

The workers are demanding a pay increase higher than the four percent offered by the company.

In another dispute, station and retain jobs staff are to strike the company for 48 hours from June 27. The employees, also members of the RMT, are protesting against restructuring in their department.

## **Air traffic controllers in Italy strike in contract dispute**

On June 25, air traffic controllers in Italy held a four-hour strike in a dispute over their contract. The national air traffic controllers' association, ENAV, called the strike. The Alitalia airline cancelled 106 domestic and international flights and rescheduled 200 flights for the following day.

## **Greek ferry workers strike ends after government imposes emergency law**

On June 18, Greek ferry employees began a strike that lasted for four days. The workers are protesting to demand an increase in pension funds and benefits. The government is carrying out a restructuring of the pension and welfare system in Greece and workers fear that this will lead to an undermining of job security and attacks on their pension rights.

The strike ended on June 22, following government threats to arrest strikers. The government enforced the emergency mobilisation decree to end the strike and this was accepted by the ferry workers union.

The strike had a major impact on the tourist industry in Greece, as holidaymakers who booked island trips were confined in Athens and other mainland cities.

### **Rail workers strike in France over workload increase**

Rail workers employed at the SNCF state rail service took strike action on June 23 in eastern France on the gare de l'Est and the east RER-lines. The protest is part of an ongoing campaign to oppose the introduction of the new summer timetable that includes more working time.

The strike was called by the SUD trade union. The FO, CGT, CFDT, CFTC, SUD-Rail, UNSA and FGAAC unions began negotiations with SNCF on June 24 to demand a wage rise in line with inflation, an increase in railway workers pensions, a rise of the minimum wages for new employees, a 1,400 euro gross income and a minimum pension. Further negotiations are set to be held on July 3. In 2002, there has been a total of 160,000 days lost due to industrial action on the rail.

### **Paediatricians strike ends in France after settlement is reached**

The protest action by French paediatricians ended last week, following an agreement between the SNPF union and the national assurance scheme, CNAM. Staff had called for 30 euros for all consultations, instead of 22.87 euros. Under the new agreement the paediatricians will receive 28 euros per consultation. In emergency cases the paediatricians will receive 26 euros, and the same for night visits.

### **Bus drivers join strike against police harassment**

Bus drivers have joined a strike by shopkeepers against police harassment in the Adjame district of Abidjan, the economic capital of Cote D'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). Shops and markets in the working class area remained closed as of yesterday. The strike was called to protest the "constant harassment and racketeering" by the police. Drivers of the inter-city buses joined the strike after a minibus driver, who had been shot by police, died of the injuries he sustained.

According to a BBC report, a Mauritanian shopkeeper reported to the local mayor that the paramilitary police had stolen 500,000 CFA francs (\$740) from his shop. When the mayor attempted to intervene, the police threatened him. The gendarmes then vandalised the town hall and organised a raid on the local market. The mayor

has complained to the ministry of defence, but no action has been taken. There is widespread hatred of the gendarmes who boast that they are "untouchable", being the force that brought President Laurent Gbagbo to power in 2000 when, with French backing, he ousted military dictator General Guei. Gendarmes frequently set up roadblocks and demand taxi drivers and others pay bribes.

### **Nigerian doctors strike**

Residential doctors in Kano, Nigeria, have been on strike for over one month, over the payment of arrears for the doctor's allowances and salaries, and heavy taxes. The Association of Resident Doctors in Kano issued a press statement saying that their strike was in response to the "draconian tax policy of Kano State", which reduces the arrears payable to the doctors by over 40 percent. They are also demanding the payment of salaries to around 16 doctors who have been working in posts for the past eight months without receiving any money.

The strike has paralysed the public health sector in the state. The doctors had been threatening to go on strike since March this year, unless the arrears were paid.

About 200 medical students of the Bayero University Kano organised a demonstration on June 23, to protest the non-payment of doctors. Marching to the Emir of Kano's palace the student-doctors carried placards with slogans including: "Ratio of 80,000 patients to one doctor is ridiculous".



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