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Norway

Wage strike in Norway

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On 28 May, at the same time as Spain and Ireland, Norway distinguished itself by recognising the State of Palestine, following a vote in Parliament instigated by Jonas Gahr Støre's social-liberal government, and with the support of a particularly strong Palestine solidarity movement.

At the same time, a major strike in the state civil service shook the country. However, unlike the widespread recognition of Palestine, the strike was virtually ignored, including by the Norwegian media. Every spring, wage negotiations take place between employers (private and public) and trade unions, the content of which is kept secret. An agreement ('tariffavtale') is generally reached before the deadline, thanks to the consensual culture of a country that is not very prone to industrial action. This year, for example, the local civil service (mainly schools and hospitals) signed a bad agreement, with a pay rise well below inflation.

Decline of the public service

The state civil service, particularly for graduates, benefits from a kind of special scheme guaranteeing better pay rises, but, as we might expect, the government wants to undermine it. It is supported in this by the country's largest trade union (LO for 'Landsorganisasjonen i Norge'), on the sadly trite grounds that this constitutes inequality between workers. However, the second largest union, Unio, which has a strong presence in the education and research sector, rejects the plan and the government is a long way from reaching a wage agreement.

The conflict also concerns the replacement of retiring staff, as the government has developed the unfortunate habit of hiring young graduates on the cheap, so that after a few years they leave to work in the private sector, thus contributing to the decline of the public service. State departments are short of staff and skills, so the government contracts out to the private sector or hires temporary staff on fixed-term contracts for specialised issues that it is unable to deal with. Whatever the country, the little tune that undermines the public sector is always the same!

Renewable strike

Unio, along with a number of other unions, has therefore launched a rolling strike in the state civil service. [1] The Norwegian system is very special in this respect. Each member gives his or her union the mandate to negotiate and decide on strike action. The union then sets the strike participation rate, and the strikers are chosen by lot. The lucky ones are legally obliged to go on strike, while the others have to go to work. Well-stocked strike funds make up for most of the lost wages. Surprisingly, the employer cannot give a non-striker a job usually done by a striker. On the other hand, the Norwegian government has a secret weapon, often criticised in the past by the International Labour Organisation for its abusive use: if the dispute lasts, it can submit to Parliament a vote to force the strikers to return to work, on the pretext of danger or serious consequences for society or health. A mediator between the parties is then appointed.

Between 20% and 60% of strikers

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Under this half-yellow, half-red system, 3,500 civil servants have been on strike since 27 May (in universities, research institutes, ministries, state regulatory agencies, the medical and labour inspectorates, the police, etc.), representing between 20% and 60% of strikers, depending on the sector. In this peaceful little country of five million inhabitants, the last comparable movement in the civil service dates back at least a decade. In Oslo, the head of the police union even declared, embarrassed, that this was his first time speaking at a demonstration! With negotiations at a standstill, the number of strikers will double from 3 June. In the private sector, it is possible that airline pilots and certain sectors of the retail sector will join the movement, for similar reasons.

Stay tuned!

2 June 2024

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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[1] [NEWSinENGLISH.no, 3 June 2024 "[Strikes hit police, universities, ministries, even weather forecasters](#)".