

# Workers struggles around the world: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

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### **Air France cabin crew strike**

Cabin crew staff at Air France took industrial action for two days this week in opposition to company pay structures. Half of all Air France flights have been affected by the dispute. The pay structure was imposed last June, following a 10-day strike by Air France pilots to protest cuts in salaries.

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### **Museum workers in Paris in dispute over extra workload**

Workers at the Musee d'Orsay art museum in Paris held a one-day strike November 12 to protest worsening working conditions. The sell-out exhibition of works by Vincent Van Gogh and Jean-Francois Millet has led to overcrowding in the museum and increased stress for its employees. The workers have demanded increased pay for those staff dealing directly with the extra visitors, and a smaller wage increase for other museum staff. More strikes have been threatened if there is no response to staff grievances. The Millet-Van Gogh exhibition began in September and will run until January.

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### **Train drivers continue strike action in Marseilles**

Train drivers and conductors are continuing their strike in Marseilles in southern France. On November 15, the fifth day of the dispute, only one of the five regional lines was operational. Rail workers are demanding the hiring of 30 more conductors before the new year. Train conductors in the nearby town of Avignon have announced that they will take strike action for one day in the near future. A 12-day dispute by bus drivers in Rennes in the west of France ended on November 15 after managers agreed to implement a 35-hour week, without loss of pay.

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### **Strikes paralyse transport in Italy**

Italian train workers staged a one-day walkout Tuesday, the latest in a series of strikes that have disrupted travel throughout Italy for the past two

weeks. The strike involved 10 percent of the nation's 120,000 railway workers, who were protesting a stalemate in contract renewal talks. The unions said 80 percent of the nation's trains were idled.

Striking airport workers forced the cancellation or rescheduling of scores of flights across Italy last week. Four-hour walkouts grounded flights at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport and another 50 at Milan's Malpensa hub--the nation's two biggest international airports--as well as Milan's Linate airport. A 24-hour nation-wide strike is scheduled for Friday.

In Rome taxi drivers carried out a mass demonstration and a four-day strike to protest the mayor's plans to end limits on the number of hours they work. Authorities banned a strike by the city's bus, tram and subway drivers that had been scheduled for November 12 and 13, saying the protest should be held at a later date because of the overlap with the taxi walkout.

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### **Mass protests in Romania**

Several thousand workers demonstrated in the city of Brasov, Romania, on November 15 to condemn government attacks on social conditions. Some of those attending the rally held placards with slogans such as '11 years of disillusion' and 'We won't take any more!' Others chanted: 'Thieves! Liars!'

On November 12, hundreds of Romanian truckers and taxi drivers blockaded roads outside the government's headquarters in Bucharest to protest high taxes and traffic fines. The drivers demanded the lowering of road taxes, a freeze on fuel prices and that speeding fines, imposed under a new traffic code, be cut. Drivers in other cities held similar demonstrations. Fines have been increased from the equivalent of \$1.50 to \$40. The average cost of a litre of unleaded petrol is now 60 cents, while the average weekly wage of a Romanian worker is only \$30. The dispute was ended when the government announced it would decrease traffic and speeding fines.

Students have ended demonstrations in Bucharest against plans to cut the state education budget. The protests were called off on November 15 after the government agreed to increase education spending to 4 percent of GDP. Student leaders said that the government was also scrapping new tuition fees. However, the government is to consider its approach to other student demands for lower train fares and subsidised medical expenses.

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### **London Underground workers vote for strike action**

Signalling workers on London Underground's Northern Line have voted to take strike action against management intimidation. The 30 Euston station-based workers--members of the transport union RMT--voted for industrial action on November 14 after it was revealed that 12 of them have sought help from the Underground's stress counselling unit. The RMT, who will decide the strike dates by next week, said the action was now 'inevitable'.

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### **UK oil industry unions sign no-strike deal**

Trade unions representing 30,000 North Sea oil workers have concluded a partnership agreement with the Oil Contractors Association, representing the big oil companies. The Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) and the General and Municipal Boilermakers Union (GMBU) have agreed to 'total non-disruption' of production as part of a recognition agreement with the traditionally non-union industry. The agreement--in anticipation of the Labour government's 'Fairness at Work' legislation--covers an industry that is once again becoming notorious for its appalling safety record. A recent report highlighted that 10 years after the Piper Alpha disaster, in which 167 oil rig workers lost their lives, oil companies' cost-cutting measures were preparing the way for a similar disaster.

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#### **Rail union vetoes Eurotunnel strike vote**

Rail unions have vetoed a strike vote by Eurotunnel train drivers. British Channel Tunnel shuttle drivers, members of the ASLEF rail union, had voted by a five to one majority on November 14 for a series of one-day strikes in the run-up to Christmas. They want an increase in salaries from the current £17,200 per annum to about £24,000. Within days rail union leaders had called off the stoppages after agreeing to a far lower pay rise--a gross salary of £18,700 for drivers from next year. An immediate increase of £1,000 towards this figure has been given as a sweetener. Eurotunnel, which does not recognise ASLEF, negotiated the settlement via a company council established when the Channel Tunnel first opened.

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#### **UK Rover trade unions collaborate in job shedding**

Trade unions and management at the Rover auto plant in Longbridge, England this week were finalising an agreement that will allow over 2,000 job losses and draconian changes in working practices. At the end of last month BMW, Rover's owners, announced redundancies were necessary to cut costs. The Longbridge site is the largest car plant in Britain, employing 16,000 workers. The main unions at the plant, led by the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), are said to have agreed to up to 2,500 job losses as well as a new system of working conditions modelled on BMW's continental operations.

One of the schemes planned is to end overtime payments, with workers 'banking' extra hours worked to be used later for holidays during periods of low production. Workers at the plant could also be forced to sign 'super-flexible' contracts, resulting in cuts in pay of a quarter of existing wages. One union official commenting on the talks said, 'The negotiating atmosphere has been very positive and we have tried our best to listen to Rover's problems and be positive and flexible.'

BMW has said the new agreement must be implemented at the plant by December. It would then be implemented across the entire Rover group in Britain, affecting 38,000 workers. Auto industry analysts have reported that BMW is set to receive a state aid incentive of £300 million as part of the deal, following talks with the government. Last month Rover sales in the UK fell by 30 percent and reached a market share low of 6.6 percent.

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#### **Greek nation-wide strike called for December 15**

On November 12 the main Greek trade union federation, the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) announced a 24-hour nation-wide strike to be held on December 15. The strike has been called in response to the government's proposed budget for 1999, which is based on meeting strict criteria for the country's entry into European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Greece intends to join EMU by January 1, 2001.

On November 11 the government announced that limits would be placed on pay increases for civil servants. The 1999 budget forecasts that inflation will be at 2.4 percent and public sector pay increases just 2.0 percent. Calling the 24-hour stoppage, an official from the GSEE said, 'The December 15 action is the workers' answer to the state budget. GSEE calls on workers to respond readily.'

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#### **Nigerian bank workers strike**

Central bank workers in Nigeria's commercial capital Lagos have been on strike for over a week. The workers are demanding the bank pay a new minimum monthly wage of 5,200 naira (\$60) that was approved for civil servants by the country's military government last month. If the wage demand is not met the strike could spread to the bank's head office in the capital city of Abuja.

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#### **Strike closes schools across Lebanon**

A strike by over 33,000 primary and secondary teachers has closed 1,200 state schools across Lebanon. The secondary teachers have declared an indefinite strike while their primary school colleagues went out for two days. The teachers are demanding better pensions and revised salary scales in line with the pay of teachers in the country's state-run universities. The strikers have rejected a parliament-approved package of \$300 million to cover pay increases to public servants.

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#### **Zimbabwe strike over fuel price hikes**

Thousands of workers across Zimbabwe brought major industry to a halt November 11 as they took strike action against a 67 percent rise in fuel prices sanctioned by the government of Robert Mugabe. Strikers in the townships of Harare, Mufakose and Glen View picketed roads leading into major industrial areas. Heavily armed riot police patrolled the areas as well as the nearby towns of Chitungwiza and Gweru. Both were the scene of riots at the end of October when the fuel price increase was announced.

On November 10 the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions rejected the government's appeal to call off the strike. A government spokesman said that the fuel rise was necessary to secure a \$53 million balance-of-payments support loan from the International Monetary Fund.

See Also:

Workers Struggles: The Americas  
[17 November 1998]

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific  
[14 November 1998]



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