Workers Struggles: Europe, Russia, the Middle East and Africa

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Bosnian government slashes minimum wage

Last week, the Bosnian Moslem-Croat government cut the monthly minimum wage for workers in the main industrial sectors from 200 marka to 150 Bosnian marka ($89). These sectors include heavy manufacturing, metal industries, wood processing and textiles. The move comes just one month after the government set a minimum salary for the months of October through December at the 200 marka level. Companies claimed that they were unable to pay the original minimum wage. The average wage in the federation in October was estimated to stand at 339 marka.

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Bulgarian miners threatened with pit closure

Lead and zinc miners in southern Bulgaria on strike since November 10 were warned by the finance minister on November 19 that their pit may be closed if the strike is not ended. The 500 miners are striking the Zlatograd pit owned by the GORUBSO company to demand the payment of promised wage increases of up to 200 percent.

Finance Minister Muravei Radev sent a fax to the miners stating, 'If today, November 19, a normal working process ... is not renewed, I will be forced to issue an order for ... the company's liquidation." The ministry said that the dispute had made the financial position of the company worse and that its debt was now 5.7 billion levs ($3.18 million). A spokesman for the miners said, 'The strike will continue'.

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Russian nuclear power plant workers strike

About 3,000 nuclear workers held a one-day strike November 19 in the Ural Mountains city of Snezhinsk to demand three months of unpaid wages and a 200 percent wage increase to cope with rising inflation. A workers' appeal read, 'Constant undernourishment, insufficient medical service, inability to buy clothing and footwear for children or to pay for their education ... have created grave permanent psychological stress, which is the cause of our protests.' The Russian government owes the nuclear industry nearly $170 million for unpaid state orders. Nuclear workers in several cities held a three-day strike in September.

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Finnish McDonald's workers unionise

McDonald's has signed an agreement with the hotel and restaurant workers union in Finland covering 1,500 workers at 30 restaurants. Two thousand five hundred employees of 55 franchised restaurants are not covered by the contract. Concern over random work schedules, low wages and part-time employment was the common reason cited by workers for joining the union. McDonald's has agreed to only two regional shop stewards to cover the entire country. In European Union countries McDonald's and its franchised outlets have some 300,000 employees, while globally the figure is 1.5 million. The average age of a Finnish McDonald's worker is 21.

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Greece customs strike

On November 17 customs officials at Greece's northern border with Bulgaria and Macedonia began strike action over government restructuring of their pension fund. By the third day of the strike the dispute had caused several hundred lorries to be stranded at the border. Two hundred other drivers left their lorries and decided to wait until the dispute was over.

The government is planning to integrate the workers' pension fund with that of other civil servants. The workers say their fund is one of only a few that is not in debt. A trade union representative said that the officials would begin to take weekly strike action on November 30.

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London Jubilee Line workers continue unofficial strike

Electricians working on the Jubilee Line London Underground extension to the Millennium Dome were warned by management last week to end their unofficial strike. The 500 electricians, employed by the contractor Drake and Skull, walked off the job on November 16 after 12 electricians from London Bridge were transferred to another site. The strikers said the 12 were moved after they protested about a faulty fire alarm system at London Bridge, which meant they were not alerted to a fire hazard. The workers are demanding safer working conditions.

A spokesman for the US company Bechtel, which has been brought in to oversee the completion of the project, warned the 'illegal walkout cannot be allowed to continue'. Drake and Scull have threatened to bring in strikebreakers to finish the work. The company's project director Chris Raven said, 'At this stage we don't want to employ people who have to walk across picket lines. But bringing more staff on site is an option.'

The spokesman for the strikers, Tony Miller, said that Drake and Skull management had been 'heavy-handed and incompetent' and that workers would 'do everything possible' to stop strikebreakers crossing picket lines.

The Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) has called on the electricians to end the dispute and return to work. AEEU leader Ken Jackson, pledged that the union would do everything it could to ensure that the line was completed by the deadline of autumn of next year. Prime Minister Tony Blair also called on workers to end the dispute.

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Irish lecturers call for strike action against low pay

Lecturers at the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education in the north of Ireland called for a campaign of strike action on November 23 in opposition to low pay.

After a mass meeting in the city, one lecturer said, 'We had 300 members at a meeting this week and the unanimous decision was to take strike action. The average lecturer's salary is £15,000 to 16,000, yet some of these directors are on fat-cat salaries of around £70,000 and they're still looking for a considerable increase without agreeing to pay us anything. It's an absolute disgrace. Members are just fed up. They've seen a steady slippage of salary and loss of holidays while hours and class sizes have increased. Enough is enough.'

The lecturers have been offered a pay raise of just 3 percent, and their trade union, the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE), has urged acceptance of the deal. The pay offer applies to lecturers at all 17 Further Education colleges in the north of Ireland.

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Scottish councils announce 1,400 possible job cuts

Glasgow City Council announced on November 18 that it may cut up to 800 jobs in the next year. The council, which is dominated by the Labour Party, issued a statutory notice to trade union representatives informing them of its plans. The council said a further 200 jobs could be lost as a result of plans to reduce the number of service departments from 21 to 11. It intends to make the job cuts through voluntary redundancies, but does not rule out compulsory redundancies.

Council leader Frank McAveety said the redundancies were necessary to streamline services in preparation for next year's budget and avoid an increase in Council Tax bills. 'Our argument is that we need to commit ourselves to a standstill Council Tax figure, on the basis that people in Glasgow cannot continue to pay such a high level of tax. We are also committed to a 'best value' and a restructuring process which will ensure that front-line services will be protected.'

Over the past three years, 4,000 council jobs have been lost in Glasgow while Council Tax bills have risen by 60 percent. Glasgow imposes the highest level of council tax in Scotland, and its rate is among the three highest in Britain.

A £34 million/5 percent cut in the council's budget is being mooted. By halving the numbers of departments the council estimates it can save £5 million a year. North Lanarkshire Council also announced last week that 400 jobs are to be lost.

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Scottish teachers vote to boycott national curriculum

Members of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), which represents five out of six secondary school teachers, voted by an 86 percent majority for industrial action to boycott the 'Higher Still' education curriculum in 1999. The Executive Council of the EIS voted by 48 to 27 to begin action from December. General Secretary Ronnie Smith said: 'Higher Still cannot now go ahead in 1999.'

Teachers have expressed concerns over inadequate resources allotted to Higher Still and the implications of an increased workload. They face having to teach more than one of the planned five levels of study simultaneously in a single classroom.

The membership of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association meets in December. It is also expected to vote for a boycott, meaning that almost all of Scotland's 24,000 secondary teachers will be opposing Higher Still.

A number of the 32 councils in Scotland have looked at ways of disciplining teachers who refuse to implement the curriculum. Suspensions as well as deductions in pay are being considered. Another proposal is for the councils to unite as a block against the teachers' action.

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Lebanese teachers return to work

Lebanon's state high school teachers ended their 11-day-old strike November 20 to demand better pensions and a narrowing of the gap between their pay and what teachers at the state-run Lebanese University receive. Their union called for teachers to suspend the strike in order to get a response to their demands from a newly elected government. Authorities have indicated that they would not concede to the teachers. About 300 striking teachers protested outside the parliament November 19 over the terms of a pay rise approved by deputies last month. The strike had halted classes for 70,000 students.

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Algerian Telecom workers end strike

The Algerian union PTT called off a nine-day strike by 35,000 telecommunications workers November 24, the day after the government declared the strike illegal. PTT said it called off the strike 'to show our goodwill towards the authorities.' Thousands of telecommunication workers started a strike on November 16 to press authorities to double the year-end bonus to 4,000 dinars ($70) and provide loans for needy workers to build houses.

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Zimbabwean unions call off planned strike

The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) called off the third in a series of planned one-day national strikes, saying it would give the government a chance to respond to its demands. Two one-day strikes over the past two weeks demanding a 20 percent pay hike for all workers and the cancelling of a 67 percent fuel price rise had paralysed the country.

ZCTU called off a planned strike for November 25, and instead called for a meeting of the tripartite negotiating forum of government, business and labour leaders to be held before November 30. Eighteen years of President Robert Mugabe's rule have benefited the capitalist class and a thin layer of black entrepreneurs and corrupt government officials, while workers are facing the brunt of the economic crisis with soaring inflation and a crashing currency.

See Also:
Workers Struggles: The Americas
[24 November 1998]
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[21 November 1998]
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[19 November 1998]

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