

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

31 December 1998

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- Polish miners vote for nation-wide strike
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Arc de Triomphe workers strike to demand more staff

Attendant workers at the Arc de Triomphe monument in Paris began strike action December 26 to demand management hire more workers. The dispute follows several others at public attractions in Paris this year. Staff have struck at the Orsay, Louvre and Grand Palais museums and the Eiffel Tower to demand more staff and resources.

The Arc de Triomphe, situated on the Champs-Élysées, attracts about 1.4 million visitors a year. There has been a substantial increase in attendance during the last 12 months. On December 29 the 60 workers voted to continue the strike for a further 24 hours despite a call for an end to the dispute by their trade union. Representatives of the Union of Cultural Affairs Personnel met with Culture Ministry officials December 28 in a bid to reach an agreement.

Polish miners vote for nation-wide strike

Miners in Poland voted December 21 to take nation-wide strike action if the government proceeded with plans to cut pension rights. A government bill proposes that miners work until age 65, ending their right to retire after 25 years in the industry. The government intends to cut the number of miners from 200,000 to 138,000 over the next few years and close nearly half the mines. Coal output will be cut from 137 million metric tons to 112 million metric tons a year.

After the bill was passed earlier this month, miners staged sit-ins at 50 pits. These ended on Christmas Eve,

following government assurances that the country's 200,000 remaining miners would be entitled to early retirement rights. The deal was struck with the Solidarity trade union and also covers workers such as doctors, pilots and journalists.

At a pit in southern Poland three miners who are members of Kontra, a union not included in the talks with the government, continued the protest and stayed underground during the Christmas holiday.

German government calls for wage restraint

The social democratic government of Gerhard Schröder has called on Germany's two largest unions to abandon their wage claims for 1999. On December 27, Economics Minister Werner Mueller said that the 6.5 percent wage claim of the industrial union IG Metall, and the 5.5 percent claim by the public service union OeTV, would have to be scaled down. With the OeTV representing 3.2 million workers and the IG Metall 2.7 million, the wage scales set for them tend to become the norm.

Klaus Zwickel, the leader of the IG Metall, and Herbert Mai of OeTV stated they would not reduce the claims. The OeTV is to begin talks with state employers scheduled on January 29, 1999.

Hungary rail unions prepare for week-long strike

Hungarian rail workers are preparing to strike for one week between January 4 and 10 to demand a 21 percent wage increase. The strike by engine drivers in the MSZ union is slated to begin at midnight January 4, and run until 6 a.m. (0500 GMT) on January 7. The VSZ union rail workers are to strike from 6 a.m. January 7, until midnight January 10.

On December 21 and 22 rail workers held two one-hour strikes to pressure the government into a settlement. Talks between the state rail company, MAV Rt, and the two unions were to continue over the New Year period. The MAV Rt, which employs 72,000 workers, has offered a rise of just 13 percent. Imre Markus, the leader of the VSZ, said on December 29, 'Although our last demand stands at 21 percent, we are ready for a reasonable compromise. We can call off the strike on January 6 at 4

p.m. at the latest."

Amplats strike continues

While the Anglo American Platinum mines (Amplats) strike continues, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) met for mediation on December 28 in an attempt to bring the dispute to an end. The mines involved are Amandelbult, Potgietersrus, Union Section, Lebowa and Rustenburg.

Miners due to return to work on December 27 were told to stay away by their general secretary, Archie Palane, pending the outcome of independent mediation the next day.

About 10,000 NUM workers are on strike over a wages deal that has been accepted by the Mouthpeace and other unions. Anticipated violence between Mouthpeace and the NUM has not occurred. Palane said a number of non-union members had joined the strike in response to accusations that the NUM was trying to regain support lost to Mouthpeace at Amplats mines.

The NUM asked why white miners had already received an 8 percent pay increase, the same as the NUM is demanding. Amplats recorded record profits of R1,64 billion for last year up to June.

Disputes up by 35 percent in South Africa

Up to 35 percent more disputes were referred to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration this year in South Africa in comparison to last year, with an average of 321 referrals being received each day. Also a 30 percent increase was recorded by a private disputes resolution agency, the Independent Mediation Services of SA.

Since the Labour Relations Act came into being in 1996, more than 143,000 disputes have been referred to the commission. This year 80,795 disputes were referred, compared with 60,000 last year.

Of these, just 328 arbitration awards have been taken on review to the Labour Court, with only 47 cases being successful. Individual dismissals accounted for the majority of disputes. The retail sector accounted for 20 percent of cases referred.

Nigerian workers continue minimum wage dispute

Nigerian workers in several states are continuing strike action to get the minimum wage implemented. The three-day strike action by Osun state workers is being held responsible for the deaths of five hospital patients discharged from the general hospital in Oshogbo on the day the strike commenced.

One of the families of the dead patients, Tunde Olatunbosun, said the strike action was unfortunate but

appealed to the state government to respond to workers' demands to avoid any more deaths.

The struggle of the Nigerian civil servants has been provoked by the states' military governors' refusal to pay the minimum wage and the federal government's renegeing on its previous pledges. When General Abdulsalami Abubakar came to power he promised to increase the minimum wage for civil servants from September 1. Some of the Nigerian states' workers have received increases, but in many cases only after taking strike action. This month the government announced that the minimum wage was to be reviewed downwards. It cited falling oil prices, debt repayment and a large budget deficit as justification. The government is to cut 20 percent from its recurrent expenditure for next year.

South African poultry workers locked out

Workers met the management of the Earlybird poultry farm near Johannesburg, South Africa on December 30, in an attempt to end a month-long strike over a wage increase. Seven hundred members of the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) were accused of violence and prohibited from entering the company's premises after strikebreakers were brought in two weeks ago.

Earlybird slaughters 150,000 chickens a day. It claims to have lost no production because the FAWU members have been replaced by an equal number of casual labourers.

The original claim by FAWU was for a 10.5 percent increase against an offer from management of just 8 percent. Talks between the union and management have been held through the services of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration. The union proposed a compromise settlement of 9 percent, which management rejected.



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