

Workers Struggles: Europe, Russia and Africa

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Albanian students continue hunger strike following police violence

Students in Tirana, the capital of Albania, resumed a hunger strike on December 17. Police broke up the seven-day protest. They forcibly removed around 100 students from the universities of Tirana and Skodra early that morning. The students were ejected from the discotheque where the fast was being held to demand an increase in education grants and better educational facilities. One of the strikers described the police action: 'They stormed in like Rambos and kicked and punched us while throwing us out. Then they took us to the military hospital.'

Later some 50 students returned and continued the protest. They issued calls for the resignation of the government. One of the students said, 'Either we die here or the government resigns'. The leader of the student union, Shkelzen Margjeka, said, 'We asked for dialogue but the government responded with violence.'

The government of Prime Minister Pandeli Majko used the pretext of defending the lives of the students to disperse the protest. Majko said, 'Intelligence that terrorist attacks were being planned against them made it even more important to act decisively and energetically to resolve this problem. We, the council of ministers, decided to intervene ... above all to safeguard the lives of the fasting students.'

During the dispute the government has made an offer to invest the equivalent of just \$70,000 to improve dormitory conditions.

Top of page

Fuel crew workers strike at French airports

Fuel crews at 10 of the biggest airports in France struck December 18 over a pay claim and proposed deregulation. The dispute hit both the main airports in Paris and those flights serving Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Montpellier, Marseille, Nice, Perpignan and Toulouse.

Air France, the state-owned airline, attempted to weaken the strike by refuelling many of its aircraft on December 17, but conceded that it would have to 'delay or cancel a certain number of flights.' The dispute did not hit long-haul flights.

Five of the trade unions organising the action said that the stoppage was to oppose 'deregulation that puts in peril our profession and therefore the security and the quality of our airport services'. The unions, who are currently negotiating the terms of a new 35-hour week, said that management at Air France has frozen pay and refused to hire more staff.

Top of page

Strike settled at the Louvre Museum

The Louvre Museum in Paris, France reopened on December 16 following a six-day strike by its staff that ended on December 14. The strike was called to protest against the strenuous workload facing staff. The workers were able to secure an extra two days off a year and an increase in their annual bonus of \$270 to \$360.

During the six days 60,000 people were unable to visit the museum, costing the Louvre \$715,000. The dispute is the latest in a series of strikes in Paris by staff at monuments and museums demanding a lessening of

their workload.

Top of page

Doctors and dentists in Germany hold 24-hour national strike

Doctors and dentists throughout Germany struck for 24 hours on December 18 to oppose government proposals to limit the amount spent on medicine. Around 55,000 doctors and dentists took part in the dispute, the first such action by the profession in 70 years.

The government denied that their proposals would lead to a cut in medical spending. Health Minister Andrea Fischer said, 'That is just not the case. The only change will be that doctors will be required to prescribe whenever possible the least expensive medicine.' A central provision of a new Bill is a reduction in contributions by central government for medicine. Doctors have warned that this would place extra burdens on their budget and would cut their income.

Top of page

Postal workers in Wales walk out on unofficial strike

Postal workers at the Royal Mail's sorting office in Cardiff, Wales staged an unofficial strike on December 17, severely disrupting the busy Christmas mail service. Six hundred workers walked out of sorting office, following a threat of disciplinary action against two workers, who stopped work for two hours earlier in the week over the arrangements for handling the extra Christmas workload. The dispute was ended on December 18 when the Communications Workers Union secured an agreement with management. The dispute resulted in a backlog of some 200,000 cards, letters and packages.

On December 17, in Pontypridd, South Wales 80 postal workers held the first of three planned one-day strikes over staffing levels.

Top of page

Court injunction by London Underground seeks to prevent strikes

On December 22 London Underground secured a High Court injunction outlawing a proposed strike by workers during the New Year. The ruling by Mr. Justice Sullivan, following a request from London Underground, instructed the Rail, Maritime and Transport union RMT to call off the strike. The first strike over job security was due to take place on New Years Eve and last for 24 hours. The RMT accepted the ruling and is to send out letters to its 7,000 underground member informing them of the decision.

Top of page

Thousands of Russian teachers strike to demand unpaid wages

On December 15, 23,500 teachers in eastern Siberia and northwest Russia began indefinite strike action to demand the payment of back wages. The strike is the latest in a series by workers protesting at non-receipt of wages for months on end.

In the northwest region of Vologda an estimated 12,000 teachers at 443 schools and day-care centres struck. A delegation of 100 strikers and parents of schoolchildren picketed railroad tracks. Local government authorities sent riot troops to the area to quell unrest. No violence was reported to have taken place.

The local government has blamed central government for the crisis,

because they have been given no money to pay the outstanding wage arrears. It is estimated that the teachers are owed \$14 million in unpaid wages.

In the region of Buryatia, Siberia, 11,500 teachers at a third of the region's schools struck, resulting in the suspension of lessons at 245 schools.

Top of page

Hungarian rail staff strike to demand pay rise

Railway staff in Hungary were due to strike December 22 for two hours to demand a 21 percent pay increase. Train drivers, who belong to a different trade union, staged a two-hour strike the previous day to demand a similar increase. The state-run railway company, MAV, has offered an increase of just 13.5 percent.

The president of the Rail Workers Union, Imre Markus, said on December 21, 'Since we received no further wage offer from MAV, we will have our warning strike as scheduled from 5 a.m. to 7 a.m.' The company said that the train drivers' dispute had cost 82 million forints (\$385,000) and affected 115,000 passengers.

Further strikes are to be held in January if the workers' demands are not met. The unions have once again separated the drivers dispute from that of other rail staff and have called off planned joint action. The engine drivers are to strike from midnight on January 4, while other staff will strike from January 7 to midnight January 10.

Top of page

Romanian workers threatened with sack after unofficial strike

On December 21 Romanian rail workers took unofficial strike action to demand a pay rise and bonuses. The action hit train services from the north of the country to the capital city bound for Bucharest for several hours.

Transport Minister Traian Basescu threatened to sack anyone involved. 'Within the next 72 hours, I will dismiss the people who transgressed rail transport safety rules,' he said. The minister said the workers would lose their December pay and that the revenue would go towards recouping losses incurred during the wildcat.

Top of page

Talks break down between Dutch banks and trade unions

Talks between management and unions representing bank workers in Holland ended on December 21 without agreement.

The Dienstenbond CNV, the FNV Bondgenoten and the Vakbond de Unie (VGB) unions had tabled a proposal for a pay increase of between 4 and 5 percent for 1999. This was rejected by the banking industry's negotiating body, the VGB, who proposed a 2 percent pay deal and an increase of 1 percent in the first quarter of 2000.

Jos van Dijk, a spokeswoman for the FNV Bondgenoten, said of management's offer, 'It's much too little. There is too big a gap.' She said the union might call strike action next January. 'We are going to talk with our members in the first week of January and ask them what action they wish to pursue.'

Top of page

Workers strike at *Daily Times*

Hundreds of workers at the *Daily Times Nigeria Plc*, Lagos, the country's oldest newspaper group, began strike action on the morning of December 16 to demand five months of unpaid salaries.

Workers gathered outside the company premises with placards demanding that Peter Enahoro, the sole administrator, must go. Two teams of men from Operation Sweep, organised by the company, had been brought in to protect the gates. Attempts by the strikers to get to company management were thwarted by armed police, guarding the locked gates.

Workers said the strike action would not be called off until their demands are met. Kolade Ale, National Union of Print Workers chairman, *Daily Times* chapter, said, 'Just imagine how some of us will celebrate Christmas without five months salary, not to talk of a bonus, while they

are living like kings.'

Top of page

Nigerian workers fight for minimum wage

Soon after taking power in Nigeria, Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar promised to increase the minimum monthly wage for federal civil servants from \$9 to \$61, to be implemented from September 1 this year.

This increase was to be negotiated for civil servants on a state company-by-state company basis. Militant strike action by Lagos workers was carried out when the increase was not introduced. Lagos water workers at the state water company went on strike for over a week, shutting off supply to the commercial capital. Water had to be carried in the crowded city. The water workers returned to work, on December 16, the day after the military government agreed to increase the minimum wage.

Other Lagos civil servants face the sack. Although they have settled on a minimum wage, the workers are continuing to work to rule. They attacked the leaders of their union, the Council of Industrial Unions, for signing an agreement which did not include the reinstatement of their leader, Ayodele Akele, who had been sacked by the military government for his militant stand. Students are supporting the civil servants' strike action.

Top of page

Miners strike in South Africa

As a one-day strike by 2,000 mineworkers ended on December 21 at Labowa mines, owned by Anglo American Platinum (Amplats), last minute efforts were being made to avert a strike at Amplats Rustenburg mines starting on December 23.

Amplats is the largest producer of platinum in the world and employs more than 30,000 men. Archie Palane, NUM deputy general secretary, is seeking to head off the dispute by taking it to arbitration.

Three thousand members of the National Union of Mineworkers are to strike over management's insistence that last year's agreement incorporated productivity elements in the wage rise. This is being used in an attempt to impose a further increase in productivity in this year's settlement.

The company's final offer has been implemented through an agreement with the rival Mouthpiece Workers Union. Hostility between the two unions has developed into violence. More than six NUM leaders have been killed this year.

Top of page

Kenyan teachers go unpaid

Teachers throughout Kenya spent 15 days on strike in October and protested on the streets to force the implementation of the second part of their pay award. The teachers returned to work without their increase. The strike was abandoned, on the basis of offering an olive branch to the government, as the national examinations loomed. The government has since refused to pay the award, stating that the economy could not afford it. It continues to pay the teachers salary several weeks late. The Kenyan National Union of Teachers general secretary, Ambrose Adongo, has now threatened to organise a boycott of classes.



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