

Europe, the Middle East and Africa

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French rail conductors continue strike

French rail conductors are continuing their strike to demand more jobs. By December 5 the strike had entered its ninth day. On December 4 rail unions participated in talks with the national rail company, SNCF, for eight hours. As a final offer, SNCF management offered to increase conductors' monthly bonuses and hire 540 new conductors. Rail union leaders said the offer was not suitable and said they may ask Transport Minister Jean-Claude Gayssot to intervene in the dispute. Gayssot is a member of the Stalinist French Communist Party. Bruno Dalberto, leader of the CFDT, said, "The longer the strike goes on, the more it is going to radicalise."

The dispute is affecting train service for nearly two-thirds of the country, with services between provincial areas hardest hit.

On December 4 President Jacques Chirac called on strikers to allow minimum train service. He proposed that all public sector workers establish agreements with their companies to ensure that services are maintained during strikes.

Greek workers strike against government austerity

Workers in several industries took strike action throughout Greece on December 3. A strike by customs officials on the northern border continued, despite a court injunction declaring it illegal. The strike has led to a backlog of supply lorries waiting at border stations and fuel shortages throughout the country. The strike has also halted all non-European Union trade at ports, airports and border crossings. Exports and imports to Albania have been particularly affected. The country is Greece's second trading partner following Italy and accounts for 30 to 40 percent of all imports and exports.

The customs officials are protesting government proposals to merge their pension fund with other loss-making funds. Labour Minister Miltiadis Papaioannou warned, 'If customs workers do not call off their strike, then the government will be obliged to take measures.'

A strike by rail workers took place on the same day, which blocked

inter-city trains. Justice Ministry employees struck on December 3 and 4, while finance ministry workers were preparing to strike on Friday. Students opposing government attacks on education demonstrated in Athens. Water workers also demonstrated in the city. Doctors in Athens and Piraeus have announced that they will strike for six hours on December 14 and 15. Dockers in Thessaloniki have announced that they will strike between December 11 and 15.

Many of the disputes are aimed against the austerity programme being imposed by the government to ensure Greece meets the economic criteria for the single European currency in 2002.

Finnish workers survey reveals dissatisfaction over workloads

A survey of Finnish workers has found that 87 percent are experiencing difficulties with their workloads and 'burn out'. The survey, sponsored by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), the largest union federation in the country, reported that only 28 percent of workers think that productivity could be further increased in order for Finnish firms to be internationally competitive.

Of the 1,021 Finns over the age of 15 to be interviewed, 92 percent of the women and 81 percent of the men cited difficulties with excessive workloads and exhaustion. Over 75 percent said that workers should receive the same salary increases as executives. Eighty percent said that taxes should not be cut if it resulted in social security benefit and public service reductions. Eighty percent said they favoured tax cuts on wages and salaries and an increase in property, capital and environmental taxes.

Over 75 percent opposed competitive tendering for public service contracts, as it tended to result in reduced pay and job security.

Volvo to cut 6,000 jobs

AB Volvo announced last week that it will eliminate 5,300 full-time positions and 700 temporary jobs from its world-wide car and truck operations. Most of the jobs, which will be wiped out by mid-1999, are white-collar, and about half will come from its home base in Sweden. The job cuts do not include the planned shutdown of Volvo's kit-car plant in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Volvo blamed its falling profits on spending on new products and sharp sales declines in Asia and Latin America. But CEO Leif Johansson added, 'The jobs we talking about here will not come back if there is an upturn in the business cycle.'

Russian teacher dies after hunger strike over unpaid wages

A Russian teacher died of heart failure on December 1 after taking part in a hunger strike over unpaid wages. Alexander Motorin, aged 43, died in the city of Ulyanovsk on the Volga River just three days after the hunger strike ended. Motorin was a survival-skills teacher for 11- and 12-year-old children. Others amongst the 450 teachers involved in the protest have required medical help. Teachers in the city began the hunger strike on November 19 to demand the payment of wages withheld since July. A doctor involved in the autopsy of Motorin said he had suffered a heart attack, which, due to 'a weakened

organism, led to death."

Belarus trade union federation calls off national strike

The Trade Union Federation of Belarus called off a one-day strike planned for December 2 against the government of President Alexander Lukashenko. A union press release said that the government agreed on December 1 to increase wages, cut taxes, lower inflation and aid unprofitable firms. A TUFB spokesman said, 'We have not cancelled the protest actions but postponed them in the hope of settling the current conflict peacefully, through negotiations. Otherwise a mass protest will take place on January 27.' The average monthly wage in Belarus is around \$30 a month. At the start of the year the average monthly wage was \$100 a month. Inflation was running at 21 percent in October. Rationing of such staple foods as milk, eggs and butter has been introduced.

Bahrain government to privatise public transport

The Bahrain government announced on December 7 that public transport services are to be privatised. The *Gulf Daily News*, quoting from a Cabinet statement, said, 'Both the transport ministry and the finance ministry were commissioned to start measures in privatising public transport.' The cabinet statement also said that it was considering 'proposals on speeding up the privatisation of electricity and water.'

Yemen university teachers and staff strike for higher pay

Over 4,500 teachers and other staff went on strike at the Sanaa University in Yemen on December 8. The teachers are calling for a 50 percent pay rise and have said the strike action could last 10 days. Three thousand other workers at the university, demanding the same pay rise, joined the teachers on strike. Sanaa University is the largest in the country with 55,000 students. Teachers at the university receive an average monthly wage of 25,000 riyals (US\$200).

Foreign workers in United Arab Emirates face deportation

One hundred seventy-five foreign workers have been rounded up and arrested this week in the United Arab Emirates. The workers were arrested on December 6 in the cities of Abu Dhabi and Sharjah and now face deportation. In the last two years, more than 750,000 'illegal' immigrants have been arrested and deported from the Gulf states.

Ivory Coast public sector union ends 48-hour strike

Ivory Coast public sector workers ended a 48-hour strike on December 3. The civil servants, numbering 110,000, went on strike to oppose changes to their medical allowances and bonuses. The strike was called off following a recommendation from union leader Marcel Ette. He said the dispute had been a 'warning strike' and that the union would give the government until the end of December to address their demands.

The dispute closed down the main container terminal in Vridi and particularly affected the main seaports of Abidjan and San Pedro, the main transit points for cocoa exports from the Ivory Coast. The country is the world's primary producer of cocoa beans. Some of the main shipping companies diverted their traffic to other ports in the area in order to prevent delays on their ships.

Vessels were anchored offshore as a result of the strike. In Abidjan, the commercial centre of the Ivory Coast, 38 berths at the quay were empty. Dock workers were not on strike but customs officials were, meaning that ships could not load or unload. The air cargo terminal of the international airport in Abidjan was halted due to the action of customs workers involved in the strike. Government offices in the cities were closed by the strike.

Zimbabwe government proposes legislation on strike ban

On December 3 the Zimbabwean government announced that it

intended to bring in legislation banning strikes in a forthcoming labour bill to be drafted next year. Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare Minister Florence Chitauro said that the ban was to be implemented to prevent strikes such as those that had destabilised the government over the last period.

Chitauro said, 'These stay-aways have damaged the economy and the government believes that ZCTU [Zimbabwean Trade Union Federation] is taking advantage of the inadequacies in our labour legislation.'

Last month Prime Minister Robert Mugabe decreed that all strikes would be banned for six months in anticipation of the new legislation. The decree has provisions that striking unions can be 'suspended' and strike organisers fined and jailed. Organisers could be fined up to Z\$100,000 (US\$2,700) and be jailed for up to three years.

The government has said that it still wishes to have discussions with the ZCTU on important economic and social issues.

The ZCTU responded to the strike ban by calling off a series of 24-hour strikes. The ZCTU said it had done this because the government had agreed to discuss the economic crisis and union proposals regarding Mugabe's rule. The ZCTU is calling on Mugabe to cut his ministerial cabinet from 55 to 15 people, and for the government to audit public tenders, eliminate corruption, allow free state control of the media and the parliamentary approval of a new constitution.

The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights issued a statement on December 3 stating, 'By attempting to outlaw the rights of citizens to campaign peacefully against unjust government acts, omissions or laws, the authorities are doing nothing less than provoking the people to use less passive means of objection, which may not necessarily be peaceful.'

See Also:

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[8 December 1998]

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[3 December 1998]



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