

Europe, Russia and Africa

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Greek public sector workers strike against government budget cuts

Public sector workers in Greece took strike action for 24 hours on December 15 to protest government austerity measures. In Athens thousands of workers attended a rally and public transport ground to a halt. The strike was called by the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and affected all public services including transport and state banks. Public hospitals accepted emergency cases only. The strike coincided with action by high school students and teachers, who are occupying 1,500 schools nation-wide in opposition to education legislation proposing to make teachers and students work longer hours.

Before the strike Greek President Costas Simitis announced that the government would continue with its programme. A spokesman said, 'This government has the difficult task of correcting mistakes and delays piled up for many years. It is not here to be popular, but to do what needs to be done so that Greece becomes an equal member of the European family.'

The government is attempting to impose far-reaching budget cuts so that the country can satisfy the economic criteria for participation in the European Union's single currency by 2001. Proposals include the privatisation of state firms and a freeze on wages. An official of the GSEE said on December 14, 'There are more than 2 million Greeks close to the poverty line and they are asked for even more sacrifices.'

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Croatian metalworkers protest job losses, unpaid wages

Ten thousand Croatian metalworkers were due to protest in the capital city Zagreb December 15. The workers, members of the Metalworkers Trade Union of Croatia, will attend the rally during a nation-wide one-hour strike of metalworkers. The workers are protesting against a recent spate of job losses, non-payment of wages and companies cutting back on social security payments. The International Metalworkers Federation has

endorsed the strike and rally and has called on its affiliates to send letters of protest to the government in Croatia.

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Doctors in Croatia warn of health service collapse

The national doctors association of Croatia have said that the country's health system is on the verge of collapse, threatening hospital closures and a rise in health inequalities. The association sent a letter to Prime Minister Zlatko on December 10 outlining their concerns. The letter said that the situation had 'worsened drastically' since they last raised concerns nearly two months ago.

Doctors have called for an immediate increase in the financing of the health budget, a proposal opposed by the Economy Ministry and employers' organisations, who are calling for strict cutbacks in public spending.

Doctors cited the postponement of operations, a shortage of blood products, fewer patient admissions and medical equipment out of order, with no finance available for repairs. The letter stated: 'Doctors are often coming into situations where they have to make tough ethical decisions--to whom to give the last drop of certain medicines and thus save a life. We hope you will find an urgent solution before tragic consequences come about, and the whole situation grows into a grave social crisis of unforeseeable consequences.'

The Croatian health budget is currently heavily indebted, with monthly losses of 100-150 million kuna (\$16-25 million). Taking into account accumulated losses over the past several years, this is expected to rise to 3 billion kuna this year. A month ago some of the heavily indebted medical companies ran out of supplies because their suppliers were not prepared to send more without payment.

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Turkish union federation survey reveals 600,000 job losses

More than 600,000 workers have been made unemployed in Turkey as a result of the global economic crisis, according to the Turk-Is, the largest trade union federation in the country. The leader of the union, Bayram Meral, said on December 10, 'Nearly 600,000 workers, including non-union employees, have been dismissed and we expect more. Most of those workers are from the textile sector.'

Unemployment in Turkey has risen to 6.4 percent in April from 5.9 percent a year earlier. Bulent Eczacibasi, the president of the Turkish Businessmen and Industrialists Association, has warned of more job losses, saying that a further 300,000 faced redundancy. Many of these jobs are being lost in the textile industry. Nearly 90 percent of Turkey's textile factories are small or medium sized. Their main market was Russia, prior to the economic crisis. There has also been a fall in auto manufacturing and exports this year.

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French rail conductors return to work

Nearly all of the French rail conductors voted to end their 13-day strike on December 10. Conductors in 13 of 17 regions on strike returned to work December 11, while conductors in the Chambéry region voted to continue the strike. Two other regions had yet to decide.

By December 11 most national services were running normally, with the exception of TGV and mainline trains linking Nantes with Lille, Lyon and

Marseille. These services were cut to one-third of the normal timetable. On the same day only a third of long-distance night trains ran.

The strike was held to demand that the national rail company SNCF hire 600 more conductors because more people were now using trains. The head of the SNCF, Louis Gallois, said that more staff would be hired next year but would not state how many. The local rail authorities in south-eastern France have agreed to hire just 45 extra staff next year.

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Albanian students begin hunger strike to demand more funding

Seventy students at the University of Tirana in Albania's capital city began a hunger strike on December 14 to demand that the government increase grants, spend more on books and provide better accommodation. The hunger strike began after a proposal by students to meet Prime Minister Pandeli Majko to discuss their demands was rejected.

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Polish miners threaten strike against government attack on pensions

On December 9 and 10 a delegation of Polish coal miners organised a sit-in at the Labour Ministry in Warsaw and threatened a nation-wide strike if government proposals to restructure pension rights went ahead.

The government is proposing to introduce legislation requiring miners to retire at 65 rather than after 25 years in the industry, as at present. The leader of the Solidarity trade union's mining section, Henryk Nakonieczny, said, 'If our demands are not met by December 18 ... we will organise a two-hour warning strike on December 21 and a referendum on a general strike.' Miners have rejected a Labour Ministry proposal to grant miners a special early retirement package, as it was not specific enough.

On December 10 miners from Czechott, in southern Poland, staged a sit-in underground to oppose the closure of the pit. The government is planning to close up to half of the mines in the country (25 out of 50), cutting jobs from the present 230,000 to 138,000. The scheme is aimed at cutting the output of coal from 137 million tonnes in 1997 to 112 million tonnes. The Polish mining industry has built up huge debts since its subsidies were cut in the early 1990s. The industry's debt now stands at around 14 billion zlotys (\$3 billion).

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Polish defence workers strike against non-payment of wages

Polish defence workers at the Lucznik Metal works in the southern city of Radom began a sit-in strike on December 14. The workers are demanding that wages be paid for the months of October and November. The action is the third time this year that workers at the plant have protested. A member of the strike committee said, 'The government should take note of the cultured form of protest undertaken by Lucznik workers, but not make light of it.' The workers have threatened to escalate the strike if their wages are not paid.

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Romanian workers strike against unemployment

Workers throughout Romania held demonstrations throughout the country on December 10 in opposition to the government's proposal to shut 50 unprofitable factories, with the loss of 70,000 jobs. The demonstrations were called by the BNS trade union federation. Around 6,000 workers demonstrated in the capital city of Bucharest. Many chanted slogans and held banners stating: 'We are fed up with lies' and 'We want real reconstruction, not theft, corruption and arrogance'.

On the same day copper miners in the town of Deva struck to protest against the non-payment of their wages. Several hundred workers also protested at the bauxite pits in Dobresti, near the Hungarian border, against government plans to close an aluminium processing plant which is supplied by the pits.

In Brasov, aircraft manufacturing workers from the IAR company demonstrated to demand that the government sign a contract with Bell in the United States to produce 96 helicopters. The firm has been hit by a

loss of orders. The government has called on the trade unions to implement a six-month moratorium on strike activity and other forms of protest and demonstrations so that it can have a free hand to carry out the job cuts.

The BNS union has not ruled out the job losses or the moratorium. A statement reads: 'We want the government to discuss with the trade unions all issues related to the privatisation and restructuring of companies. We want the government to set up priorities for Romania's economic development.'

The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have suspended loans to Romania and demanded that unprofitable industries and firms be closed. The government has set a target of December 20 to close these companies and cut public spending.

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Russian power workers on hunger strike

Eleven power workers in the Russian Arctic port of Pevek have begun a hunger strike to protest non-payment of wages for three and a half years. Workers in the town, who have received food packages once a month, decided to proceed with the hunger strike on November 27. The food packages consist of 1 kilo of flour, rice and beans for each family member. Workers at the power plant normally receive wages of 1,000 to 2,000 roubles (\$50 to \$100) a month.

The town's 7,000 residents have been forced into destitution by the high cost of basic necessities and supplies. Prior to the dissolution of the USSR, goods were available in areas such as Pevek at state-controlled prices. These controls have been lifted and many people live on the brink of starvation.

One of those on strike, Vera Bosak, said, 'We cannot buy tea, cannot buy sugar. Our children have not seen fruits or vegetables for months, an apple is a big holiday for them.' The strike was ongoing as of December 8.

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Ukrainian miner attempts suicide to protest lack of wages

A 35-year-old coal miner from the Ukrainian city of Luhansk immolated himself with petrol on December 14 in protest against months of unpaid wages. The man was saved after fellow miners and policemen doused the flames and sent him to hospital. The miner, Oleksandr Mykhalevych, a father of three, had burns covering almost 50 percent of his body and is in a critical condition.

Mykhalevych set himself on fire outside the Luhansk government offices to protest that miners in his city and the nearby town of Alchevsk have not been paid for over six months. He was outside the building as part of a delegation of 200 miners from Alchevsk, who have picketed the local government for several months.

Before his attempted suicide he left a note saying, 'I'm tired of being scorned by mine directors and the regional administration. My [self-immolation] is hardly a way out, but it might help resolve the matter more quickly.'

Currently more than 20,000 coal miners are on strike in Ukraine in opposition to the non-payment of wages, which now total some \$584 million.

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London Underground and Dockland's Light Railway workers to strike

London Underground maintenance workers on the Northern Line and rail staff at the Dockland's Light Railway are to take strike action in the new year to demand better pay and oppose changes in shift patterns. The action has been called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union. The RMT has said that Underground management have not ruled out compulsory redundancies.

The Underground staff and the Dockland's Light Railway workers will walk out at 11a.m. on New Year's Eve for 24 hours. On January 3 the workers will again strike for 24 hours beginning at 7 p.m. The Northern

Line has some 50 stations and is one of the Underground's busiest.
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Trade Union Congress in Britain oversees lowest level of strike activity ever

The Trade Union Congress in Britain has issued new figures showing that ballots by unions for industrial action are at the lowest level ever recorded. The TUC released the Trade Union Trends survey 'Focus on balloting and industrial action', on December 9. The main points of the report are as follows:

- Only 57 percent of unions who responded to the survey had organised ballots, a drop from 74 percent in the first survey in 1996. Only 17 unions reported taking industrial action during the survey period.

- Out of a total of 700 ballots recorded in the survey, industrial action took place in only 27 percent of cases.

- Fewer ballots for full strike action were held than in the previous year (46 percent compared to 54 percent).

- Trade unions were more likely to ballot for action short of a strike (i.e., stoppages and work-to-rule) than in the 1997 survey (18 percent compared to 16 percent).

- Unions said that they were more likely to get a 'yes' majority from the work force for action short of a strike than when balloting for full strike action.

- Most ballots on industrial action concerned the pay of workers (47 percent). The next most common industrial action ballots were in opposition to employers changes to working time/practices (25 percent).

- One in four unions reported that it can take six weeks or more to organise a ballot as a result of staying within the law.

- The majority of strike action today is 'selective' (57 percent) and involves strikes of one or two days duration, while most of the other industrial actions were overtime bans (27 percent).

- Unions reported only 21 cases of legal action against them by employers.

The General Secretary of the TUC, John Monks, welcomed the survey's findings saying, 'Industrial action remains at an all-time low. Partnership is now the dominant mode in industrial relations. These figures show that no reasonable employer has anything to fear from the Fairness at Work legislation [the Blair government's new labour legislation].'

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Zimbabwe government, unions fail to reach agreement

Talks between the Zimbabwean government of Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) broke down on December 9, with the union federation claiming the government would not release information it required. ZCTU Secretary-General Morgan Tsvangirai said the union would meet with the government again on December 17.

The union has called for a 20 percent pay increase for workers, the removal of a 67 percent increase in the price of petrol, an investigation into government corruption allegations, and an account of the financial cost of Zimbabwe's intervention into the conflict in the Congo.

The government has stated that it would like to establish a social contract, with agreement between itself, business and the unions. Such a contract is expected to freeze workers' pay and lead to cuts in public spending. The talks are also to discuss the 1999 budget and how to stabilise the Zimbabwe dollar, which has lost half of its value against the US dollar. During the period of the talks the ZCTU has agreed to suspend

three planned weekly strikes, complying with a government decree banning strikes for the next six months.

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Senegalese court sentences trade union leaders to imprisonment

On December 8 a Senegalese court sentenced two trade union officials--Mademba Sock, the leader of the SUTELEC power workers union, and Samba Yero Sylla--to six months imprisonment on the charge of 'creating public disturbances'. The officials were arrested on July 20 at the country's main power plant and charged with sabotage. A further 24 workers were arrested, but acquitted.

The workers were protesting against the privatisation of the SENELEC electric company and were held responsible for power cuts in the capital city of Dakar as a result of their actions. The lawyer for Sock, Ousmane Ngom said, 'They were not found guilty of sabotage but of creating public disturbances. Since the president of the court did not find them guilty on the charges of sabotage it would have been consistent to free all of them.'

The privatisation of the company is expected to be completed by March 31 according to SENELEC's general manager. He said that the workers involved in the trial would also lose their jobs.

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South Africa public service union threatens strike

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (NEHAWU) have threatened a national strike to begin early next year. The union is demanding a moratorium on job losses, an appropriate skills audit model and the reinstatement of sacked workers. The strike threat was made on December 13 by NEHAWU President Vusi Nhlapo, who said the strike would begin in March if employers continued 'negotiating in bad faith'.

Air Algeria workers strike against job losses

Workers at Air Algeria ended their strike on December 7 following an agreement by management to cancel a scheme to cut the airline's 9,000-strong work force by a third. The strike lasted one day and stopped air traffic throughout the country. All 40 planes owned by the state airline were grounded by the dispute. The company's pilots, technicians and airport workers staged a 13-day-long strike in October over the same issue.



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