

Europe and Africa

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Romanian miners strike against pit closures

Coal miners in Romania's Jiu Valley struck on January 4 to demand a pay increase, no pit closures and the write-off of debts run up by a local mining company. Two thousand five hundred miners marched through Petrosani, the main town in the region. The miners union president, Miron Cozma, gave Prime Minister Radu Vasile one day to come to the region to discuss miners' concerns.

Cozma called for the sacking of Industry Minister Radu Berceanu, who has proposed closing unprofitable coal mines. Some 2,000 Jiu Valley miners will be made redundant this year if the pit closure programme proceeds.

The government rejected the ultimatum to address the miners and issued a statement saying: "Faced with this ultimatum ... the government will not conduct any dialogue. We regret the situation created by the Jiu Valley mining unions, whose policy of force can only scare off prospective investors." Recently the government declared the Jiu Valley a "disadvantaged area" and offered firms a 10-year tax break as an incentive to invest there. The government also rejected the demands for bailing out the local mining company and for an increase in miners' monthly pay to the

equivalent of \$346, from the current \$231.

On January 5 Cozma warned that miners would demonstrate in Romania's capital of Bucharest if their demands were not met. The government responded by saying it would implement the closure plan and would not allow miners to book trains to travel to the capital.

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Hungarian rail workers strike as unions sign agreement

Rail workers in Hungary struck January 4 to demand a pay increase of 1.5 percent. The workers, members of the VDSZSZ trade union, struck as two other rail unions reached an agreement with the state railway company MAV Rt. The VSZ and MSZ unions, who were due to strike for several days after the VDSZSZ workers, instructed their members to return to work.

The MAV said that 4,700 out of 56,000 rail employees had taken part in the strike, while the VDSZSZ said that around 8,400 had struck.

The strike meant that just under half of scheduled train services did not run. Rail traffic was severely hit around the eastern Hungarian cities of Debrecen, Miskolc and Zahony. At the southern rail hub of Pecs 40 percent of scheduled trains were cancelled.

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Polish anaesthetists in protest over health service changes

Polish anaesthetists held a day of action on January 4 in protest over government changes in health care. The dispute affected hospitals nation-wide, with nearly all hospitals in the south-east of the country hit by the action. In many areas the dispute meant that only senior doctors were on duty and cases were dealt with on an emergency-only basis.

Around 1,800 of the country's 2,700 anaesthetists have resigned in protest at a government decision not to let them sign contracts with 16 recently established regional health funds. The legislation only allows for hospitals to sign contracts with the health funds, but not

health professionals. Anaesthetists have claimed that this will mean a cut in their budgets.

Many of the resignations will take place over the next week, following the introduction of new health financing legislation in the New Year. A leader of the anaesthetists union said that in the south-east area "around 200 anaesthetists are taking part in the protest in the Wielkopolska region, which is about 90 percent of the total".

Deputy Health Minister Jacek Wutzow said that the government would move medical specialists into hospitals to cover shortages in regions affected by the dispute, and would consider utilising military doctors.

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Paris monument staff end strike

Attendant staff at the Arc de Triomphe monument in Paris, France ended their five-day strike on December 31, following an agreement with management. The workers had struck to demand the hiring of more staff to deal with the increasing numbers of visitors to the monument, which attracts more than 1.5 million people a year. Workers also demanded bonuses to recompense them for dealing constantly with the public.

A spokesman for the 50 strikers said that the agreement with management included a provision for the hiring of just five more staff. Details of any increases in pay have not yet been disclosed.

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Earlybird poultry strike expands in South Africa

After the failure of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration to resolve the differences over pay between the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) and the Earlybird poultry company, the month-long strike was escalated from December 30.

The strike was concentrated at the company's Olifantsfontein plant near Johannesburg, South Africa. A secondary strike is to be extended to the Standerton works, said FAWU spokesman Nzipho Kalipa. This will involve over 1,500 workers.

The company brought in 700 casual workers to break the strike and said no production had been lost. The secondary action will affect all of the company's business units and cripple production. A manager at the company said the union action contravened the Labour Relations Act. FAWU's demand for a 9.6 percent rise, reduced from 10.5 percent, is justified by an inflation rate of over 9 percent, Kalipa said. The company has

not shifted from its 8 percent offer from the beginning of the dispute. The workers' Christmas bonus, which had been set to increase from R300 to R500 for 1998, has not been paid.

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Mortuary workers strike in Congo

Mortuary workers in Brazzaville, Congo, went out on strike Wednesday, December 30 to demand payment of 18 months wages arrears. Civil servants also queued at banks to collect their salaries, but the government had not sent any cheques to cover their wages. 67,000 civil servants have not received their monthly pay since September.

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