

Europe and Africa

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German engineers warn of strikes over pay

The IG Metall union has warned that its members could strike if employers do not accept the union's demand for a 6.5 percent pay increase. On January 11, IG Metall spokesman Claus Eilrich said, "If they [the employers] are thinking of offering a pay rise of 2 to 3 percent, then there will be no agreement." IG Metall has set January 28 as the deadline for completing the pay negotiations. Juergen Peters, the union's deputy leader, warned, "If we don't get an acceptable offer by then, our members will not hesitate to start demonstrations and warning strikes."

Employers are insisting that any pay award be linked to productivity increases. IG Metall has not opposed this, arguing instead that its demand is based on an estimated productivity rise in the engineering sector of 2.5 percent and an inflation rate of 1.5 percent. Other unions have also tabled pay demands. The white-collar DAG union is calling for a 3 percent increase and the IG Bau construction union, which represents 1.2 million building workers, a 3.5 percent rise.

The social democratic-led government has opposed pay increases on the basis that this would lead to inflation. Finance Minister Oskar Lafontaine warned: "Wages which do not reflect a rise in productivity are bad wages."

Hungarian rail union suspends strike after court ruling

The Budapest Labour Court ruled that a four-day rail workers strike in Hungary was illegal and demanded an end to the dispute. The strike began on January 4 over pay. The workers returned to the job January 8 at midday, following the court ruling. The Free Trade Union of Railway Workers (VDSZSZ) union suspended strike action.

A leader of the VDSZSZ said of the decision, "We do

not accept the Budapest Labour Court's first-level decision, and within eight days we will appeal." The VDSZSZ organises 15,000 of the state railway company MAV's 56,000 workers.

The VDSZSZ had demanded a 16.5 percent pay increase, while MAV said it would offer only 14.5 percent. MAV had threatened to sue the union and warned that it would withdraw 1 percent from its proposed wage increase for each day of the strike.

Romanian miners leader calls for president to end dispute

On January 12 a Romanian miners union leader called on President Emil Constantinescu to use his powers to end a week-old strike by miners in the Jiu Valley area. Miron Cozma told a rally of 10,000 strikers in the town of Petrosani, "We have asked the president to use his powers as mediator in order to solve this conflict." Miners at the rally condemned the government as "Thieves and liars", and shouted other slogans such as "We will fight on to defend the Jiu Valley".

The strike began on January 4 over pay demands and in opposition to government plans to close unprofitable mines. Miners are calling for a monthly pay increase of 33 percent. This would give them approximately \$340, compared to the present \$230. Miners have also demanded the government write off the local mining company's debts.

The striking miners have rejected an agreement negotiated between union leaders and the government. The union initially presented a list of 30 demands, but has dropped some of these--including the call for a \$10,000 redundancy payment for each miner sacked.

The government has to meet \$2.5 billion in foreign debt repayments this year. It is implementing an austerity plan dictated by the International Monetary Fund. This requires the closure of more than 140 coal and metal mines and another 50 unprofitable plants this year. Last week the government banned miners from

renting trains to travel to Bucharest, the capital city, to hold demonstrations. On January 12 the authorities deployed 3,000 anti-riot troops on the main road near Petrosani to prevent miners from travelling to Bucharest. Troops had filled trucks with sand to be used as roadblocks if required. The city hall in Bucharest also refused miners use of its facilities.

Russian schoolteachers strike to demand back pay

On January 12 more than 150 schools in the Irkutsk region of eastern Siberia were closed at the beginning of the new term, as teachers took strike action. The teachers are demanding unpaid wages of over 300 million roubles (\$13 million). The strike is a continuation of those from the last school term, which involved thousands of teachers from all over Russia.

Electricity supply workers strike in Zambia

Workers at the Zambia Electricity and Supply Corporation (Zesco) went on strike last week to demand the payment of their Christmas bonuses. Their action followed rumours that the government had instructed the National Electricity Company to divert the bonus payments to finance local elections. Workers are also angry at Zesco's countrywide disconnection program, which is being directed by Deputy Energy Minister Celestino Chibamba. They say the program, which has caused a public outcry, is an attempt to recover money for the government.

The strike started in Ndola and spread quickly across the nation. Efforts by government and Zesco management failed to get the workers to return to work. The action has also affected the neighbouring countries of Botswana and Namibia, which are dependent on Zambia for their electricity, as the Katima Mulilo substation has broken down and cannot be repaired while the dispute continues.

Energy Minister Ben Mwila was booed and jeered by workers when he addressed a meeting at Zesco head offices in Lusaka on January 8 to plead with them to return to work. Mwila responded, "We are not going to be intimidated. We will not be blackmailed. There must be discipline in the nation. Zesco workers are being selfish and greedy." He went on to complain that the World Bank was forcing the government to increase electricity tariffs to 52 percent. Zesco had only recently raised them 25 percent.

In response to the strike, the Zambian Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) General Secretary, Silvester

Tembo announced that he has taken over the operations and management of the electricity workers union (ZEAWU) and installed a new management team.

Tembo said the decision to take over the union was made on January 7, following discussions between the ZCTU and ZEAWU executive committee. Appealing for calm for the "benefit of stakeholders", he called on ZEAWU members to end their strike "and leave the issue to be sorted out between the ZEAWU management team and Zesco management". The new management consists of representatives from the ZCTU, the National Union of Communications Workers, the National Teachers Union and the Railway Workers Union. ZEAWU trustees will take part as custodians of union property.



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