Europe, Africa and the Middle East

21 January 1999

Dutch teachers strike for pay increases

Schoolteachers in Holland began their first week of rolling strike action on January 18 to protest the government's last pay offer. The teachers' unions have said that they expect 50,000 of their members to take action. The government of Prime Minister Wim Kok has made an offer to increase pay by just 1.4 percent. Teachers unions have called for an increase of 3.5 percent and an end-of-year bonus.

Teachers in the southern provinces of Limburg and Noord-Brabant walked out first and will be joined later this week by other teachers. In the southern town of Den Bosch over 7, 000 striking teachers lobbied a speech by Education Minister Loek Hermans. Prior to the lobby, teachers attended a rally of 15,000 in support of the dispute.

Greek students continue protests against education cuts

On January 18 students in the Greek cities of Athens, Thessaloniki and Larissa blocked roads in protest against government plans to restructure the education system. The conflict has erupted over Education Minister Gerassimos Arsenis's plan to change the students' evaluation system and university entrance examinations.

Students at the road blockades burnt effigies of Arsenis and called on drivers to support their demands. They are combining street protests with their ongoing occupation of hundreds of schools. Around 600 of Greece's 3,000 high schools are being occupied. Most of these schools are in Athens. On January 21 and 27 teachers are planning to take strike action in support of the students.

On January 15, mass demonstrations of students in Athens and other cities were met with police suppression as riots broke out.

The students have called on Prime Minister Costas Simitis to personally intervene to resolve the crisis. The prime minister, a supporter of Arsenis, survived a vote of no-confidence on January 16.

Maintenance workers strike at French airport

Maintenance workers at Orly airport, south of Paris, took strike action on January 14. The staff struck to protest an agreement by ground personnel union representatives and management at Air France which laid the basis for the introduction of a 35-hour week. The workers also called for a bonus payment for working nights and shift work. The 20 maintenance workers forced the cancellation of 17 Air France domestic flights. Other domestic and international flights were delayed.

German metal and engineering workers strike over pay

Forty thousand German metal and engineering workers struck on January 15 in a series of short strikes to demand higher wages. The strikes, organised by the IG Metall union, were held in the southern state of Baden-Wuerttemberg,

In Stuttgart 22,000 workers at five companies left their shifts early or struck in the middle of the afternoon. IG Metall is calling for a wage increase of 6.5 percent for its members. Companies hit by the strike included auto manufacturers DaimlerChrysler AG, Porsche AG and Alcatel SEL AG, the German subsidiary of French telecommunications equipment maker Alcatel SA. Robert Bosch GmbH, the electrical engineering group, was also hit. At DaimlerChrysler 16,700 workers at two plants walked out an hour before their shift ended or took part in 30-minute workplace meetings to discuss the dispute. Some 1,200 Porsche's workers at the Zuffenhausen plant also struck during the day.

Talks between the unions and the employers' organisation, Gesamtmetall in Baden-Wuerttemberg, have been adjourned until January 28. Around 840,000 metal and engineering workers will be affected by the wage agreement in the state.

Polish miners demonstrate against austerity measures

More than 2,000 coal miners demonstrated against the Polish government's restructuring of the industry in Katowice on January 15. The demonstration was called by the majority of the mining unions, with the exception of Solidarity's mining section.

Miners shouted slogans condemning the AWS-Solidarity movement, which forms a section of the government coalition. The protesters carried an effigy of Marian Krzaklewski, the leader of AWS-Solidarity. The miners are opposed to the pit closures announced by the government and a freeze on their wages. The cuts are part of the austerity programme being implemented to ensure Poland meets the criteria for membership in the European Union.

Romanian miners break through police cordon

Ten thousand striking Romanian coal miners broke through riot police cordons in a narrow gorge of the River

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Jiu, near the town of Bumbesti in the Jiu Valley, on January 19. The miners are marching on the capital of Bucharest, after being on strike for two weeks.

They began the march from the town of Petrosani in the Jiu Valley, 210 miles north-west of Bucharest, on January 18. Over 3,000 riot police tried to stop the progress of the miners by setting up roadblocks and firing tear gas. Following the confrontation, the police said that they would be negotiating with union leaders in Bumbesti.

The strikers are demanding a pay increase of 35 percent and the reopening of several mines closed last year. Miners are also calling on the government to write off the debt of a mining company in the Jiu Valley.

On January 14 miners' union leaders met with Industry Minister Radu Berceanu in Bucharest to discuss their grievances. On January 18 Prime Minister Radu Vasile called on strikers to end the march and their protest. The government has confirmed that it intends to restructure the coal industry and plans to close 140 mines this year. Talks broke down without an agreement.

The Bucharest local authority said on the same day that it would refuse the miners permission to demonstrate in the city. The Transport Ministry had already refused the miners permission to use trains to make the journey.

British meat inspectors set to vote for strike action

One thousand meat inspectors in England, Scotland and Wales are set to vote for a series of strikes to demand better pay. The workers, members of the UNISON trade union, have been offered a pay increase of 4 percent but are demanding 5 percent. The meat inspectors are also calling for an end to the intimidation and violence they face from abattoir owners as they check the quality of carcasses.

Israeli municipal workers strike

A strike by council workers on January 18 shut down schools throughout Israel. Municipal staff in five towns struck in opposition to not being paid for months. Financial cuts in local council expenditure are being cited as the reason for the delay in the payment of wages. In the Tel Aviv area of Or Yehuda, 500 municipal workers have not received any wages for three months. Workers in the area welded school gates together in order to prevent them from opening, according to a trade union representative. The same spokesman said that no local services would be administered until the workers were paid.

Last week rubbish was left uncollected for several days, as sanitation workers struck. Due to fears that disease could spread as a result, the rubbish was collected by workers from a nearby town and disposed of.

The strikes and demonstrations have been held sporadically over the past two weeks. The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has not yet agreed to a deal authorising the payment of wages.

Strike action soars in South Africa

A report by labour consultants Andrew Levy and Associates on January 13 show strike days increased fourfold in South Africa last year, reversing a decline in strikes over the last three years.

In 1998 industrial disputes accounted for the loss of 2.3 million man-days, as opposed to 650,000 in 1997. These figures are reported under circumstances where over a third of the labour force is estimated to lack formal work and thousands more have lost their jobs as industries such as mining have reduced their payroll. The report says that 96.8 percent of all industrial action was in opposition to declining wages, the highest figure for eight years. Mass action grew sharply, with almost two-thirds of strikes involving more than 1,000 workers compared with less than half that figure in 1997. The main arenas for strike action were in motor assembly, component industries, chemicals, road haulage and the private security businesses.

Zambian electrical workers union deregulated

Following the Zambian Congress of Trade Unions' (ZCTU) take-over of the Electrical and Allied Trade Union (ZEAWU) on January 7, Labour Minister Peter Manchungwa has deregulated ZEAWU.

Workers at the Zambian Electricity and Supply Corporation (Zesco) went on strike in early January to demand payment of their Christmas bonuses. In response the energy ministry denounced the workers for being "greedy" and blackmailing the government. The ZCTU demanded the workers return to work and took over the union, which had lost control of the strike.

The Zesco management, after firstly refusing to recognise the ZCTU as caretaker of the electrical workers union, did a U-turn and the two parties have agreed to hold regular meetings to discuss the "welfare" of Zesco employees. One worker commented, "These so-called trade unionists [the ZCTU] are fond of getting directives from the government instead of getting them from us, the trade union members."

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