Europe, the Middle East and Africa

28 January 1999

German engineering workers to strike for higher pay

Germany's engineering workers are set to take strike action January 29, following the rejection of the offer made by the employers organisation Gesamtmetall.

Gesamtmetall have offered a pay rise of 2 percent for the next year. The IG Metall, with a membership of 3.4 million, was calling for an increase of around 6.5 percent. The union has stated that its demand is on the basis of a calculated productivity rise of 2.5 percent and a 1.5 percent increase in inflation. A spokesman for the union said on January 25, "The employers' offer is a slap in the face."

The strikes will be of a limited duration, with workers leaving work early or staging two-hour strikes.

On January 22, the IG Metall and Gesamtmetall held discussions in three other states--North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse and Bavaria. The next date for talks between the employers and the union is set for February 1, and the union has set a date of February 11 to reach a settlement. If no settlement is reached, the union has warned that further strikes could be called at the end of February or beginning of March.

Russian minister calls for end to teachers strike threat

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Valentina Matviyenko has called on public sector workers throughout the country not to participate in a planned strike on January 29. Teachers are to protest against the non-payment of wages, which has meant hundreds of thousands of workers going months without pay.

On January 22, Matviyenko said, "Protest actions can only worsen the economic situation in the country. Our common task is to persuade the teachers and education sector workers that such an approach is not constructive." The unpaid wage bill is escalating every month. As of January 1, the overall wage debt to state sector workers was 13.1 billion roubles ($570 million), the government recently said. On January 22 the military newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* said that unpaid wages owed to the military sector totalled 7.5 billion roubles ($326 million).

UK meat inspectors to strike for 24 hours

Meat inspectors in England, Wales and Scotland are set to strike for 24 hours on February 2 to demand better pay and an end to intimidation. The 1,000 meat inspectors last week voted overwhelmingly for strike action, following a 4 percent pay deal imposed on them by their employers, the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS), part of the Ministry of Agriculture. Meat inspectors are also concerned about the increase in violent attacks and intimidation they encounter as they check the standards of slaughterhouses and their products.

The public sector union UNISON called the strike and said that it would "seriously disrupt" meat production nationwide. UNISON has warned that the strike could be followed by others of a longer duration.

The MHS has rejected demands for higher pay and said that it intends to use veterinary surgeons and local authority environmental health officers to offset the impact of the strike. UNISON has called for a 5 percent pay increase, saying that the difference between the imposed increase and its own is a "drop in the ocean".

The dispute may affect European Commission spot-checks on British slaughterhouses that are due to be held before the longstanding ban on British beef exports can be lifted.

British hospital workers union calls for wage rise

The public sector union UNISON has put forward an annual pay claim of 10 percent or £1,000 for hospital ancillary workers. It said on January 26 that a similar claim would be made for ambulance workers and technical staff at hospitals. A recent survey found that ancillary workers started on pay levels of just £3.59 an hour.

Ford UK factory to shut down for 25 days

The auto company Ford UK is to close its Dagenham plant in Essex, England in order to cut production by

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40,000 vehicles. The company cited falling orders in its export markets as the reason for the shutdown. The move will affect 3,500 workers at the plant and will begin on February 1. The company also announced January 26 that it would continue its policy of employing workers short-time on a four-day week rota. The shift pattern, introduced last October, will continue at least until April.

Portuguese government signs pay deal with public sector staff

The Portuguese government agreed to a 3 percent pay deal with public sector workers on January 26. The deal was signed with one of the main union federations representing 600,000 workers. Initially the government had set a pay limit of 2 percent to keep within its inflation target. The pay increase was lower than the demands being made by Portugal's union federation. Two of the federations have refused to accept the agreement. One of them, the Communist Party-led Common Front, had called for an increase of 4.1 percent.

The deal agreed with public sector unions prepares the way for the forthcoming talks between the private sector companies and workers.

Israeli union federation threatens general strike

On January 21 the national union federation in Israel, the Histadrut, warned that it would call a general strike in two weeks if it were unable to establish an agreement on wages with the government during current negotiations.

The Histadrut's chief negotiator, Shlomo Shani, said, "If within two weeks no agreements are reached, we'll call a general strike." The federation is calling for a new pay deal for public sector workers and an increase in pay for workers in the private sector. Histadrut stated that private sector pay should be increased due to a surge in inflation during October and November 1998.

Mozambican workers strike against low pay

More than 400 labourers at the Mozal Aluminum smelter site in Mozambique were sacked on January 19, after taking unofficial industrial action. The workers struck after they learned they were being paid far less than their South African counterparts on the construction site, run by Concor, a South African company building a 5 billion rand aluminum smelter outside Maputo.

Mozambican workers previously protested in September last year for a 400 percent rise to increase their wages from US$0.24 to US$1.07 per hour. The company offered 10 percent to start from January. The work force last week discovered that the company was paying US$16 to the lowest paid South African workers. Workers representative Basilio Madumane said that the strike had been illegal and had not been approved by the recognised union and that they had not given the legally required 72 hours warning to the company. But he went on to say, "How can you plan an outrage? This protest was spontaneous after workers were told how much they had actually earned for hours of hard work."

Sugar workers on indefinite strike

Moroccan workers have been on strike demanding better conditions for five weeks at the main sugar refinery, Cosumar, which employs around 3,000. A trade union spokesman said there was no resolution to the dispute in sight.

Morocco consumes about a million tons of sugar a year, of which half is imported, mostly by Cosumar. It has about two months' supply left, but some rural areas are beginning to feel an impact.

The workers are demanding a review of working hours and other social conditions as part of a restructuring program being brought in to boost 24-hour production with new refining and processing methods.

The spokesman for the Moroccan Labour Union (MLU) said, "The strike at Cosumar is continuing because the workers demands are not being satisfied. Work will only resume when a reasonable accord is reached with the refinery management."

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