

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

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Nearly 250,000 engineering and metal workers strike in Germany

On January 29, more than 220,000 metal and engineering workers across Germany struck as part of a continuing campaign to demand pay increases. The engineering union IG Metall called the strike. All told, 652 companies in 13 states were hit by the strike action.

Fifteen thousand workers at the auto manufacturer Daimler/Chrysler AG left work early and another 9,000 workers at BMW's Dingolfing factory struck for two hours. Workers at Ford's German car operations also struck, as well as workers at the steel group Salzgitter AG and the truck maker MAN AG. Workers at dozens of smaller plants that supply components to the auto industry also held strikes.

On February 1, 26,000 German metalworkers at over 40 firms walked out to continue the campaign for higher pay. On the same day negotiations between the IG Metall union and the employers' organisation Gesamtmetall in the eastern German state of Brandenburg and Berlin were halted, pending a new proposal from Gesamtmetall.

In the city of Cologne 11,600 workers at the Ford auto plant walked off the job in the morning. Workers at three other plants in the city also participated. In Bavaria, 2,000 workers struck for several hours at a number of workplaces. Another 11,000 workers struck in various towns and cities later in the afternoon. Demonstrations and protests were held in the cities of Berlin, Kiel and Saarbruecken.

IG Metall is calling for a 6.5 percent pay rise, while the employers have offered 2 percent, with an additional lump sum equivalent to 0.5 percent. Gesamtmetall was due to put forward its latest offer on February 3. More strikes were expected on February 2 and 3 in North Rhine-Westphalia.

IG Metall negotiator for its Northern Region, Frank Teichmueller, warned that if an agreement is not reached by the time of the next planned strikes on February 9, then the union would call an all-out strike. Teichmueller said, "We have helped the companies increase their profits to 68 billion marks in 1998 from 9 billion marks in 1993, while in the same time period the employees have had to take pay cuts in real terms. Now it's time for the employees to profit as well." The union's pay claim is based on future productivity concessions from IG Metall members.

Finnish air control staff strike to demand better pay

Finnish air controllers began strike action on February 1 following their rejection of a pay offer of 12 percent. The action led to the delay of flights and the cancellation of some at the Helsinki-Vantaa international airport.

The national airline Finnair stated that it would fly all its long-distance and charter services and the majority of flights to European destinations during the strike. The aviation board reported that the dispute would disrupt most domestic flights as Finnair would be able to fly only a few services from Helsinki.

Italian metal workers strike warning

Metal workers in Italy are set to go on strike, as talks between trade unions and the employers' organisation Federmeccanica on a new contract have failed to reach agreement.

The contract talks, which affect 1.5 million workers, are to be continued on February 3. The leader of the FIOM union, Claudio Sabattini, said, "We believe that without a strike it will be impossible to find a way out of the current impasse."

The government of Massimo D'Alema warned that it could intervene to resolve the dispute if the talks fail to reach a settlement. On February 2, trade union representatives said that they would call strike action on February 18 or 19 if an agreement was not finalised shortly. The general secretary of the FIM union said, "If

there is no breakthrough in the negotiations, we will call a strike on February 2."

Russian teachers end strike to demand back pay

A strike by 180,000 Russian teachers ended on January 29, following an agreement by the government to pay wages on a regular basis this year. The strike was called by the Education and Science Employees Union (ESEUR) to protest at the non-payment of wages that has left teachers without pay for months.

Teachers in 35 of Russia's 89 regions took some form of action during the three-day strike, including holding meetings, sending letters and telegrams and cancelling some classes at schools. The union estimated that 6,284 schools were affected by the dispute. A spokesman for the ESEUR reported that teachers are owed some 15 billion roubles (\$670 million) in back pay. On average teachers have not been paid for more than four months. In some rural regions some teachers have not received wages for over 18 months.

On January 27 teachers at School Number 20 in Ulyanovsk, on the Volga River, protested in memory of Alexander Motorin, a teacher who died as the result of a 10-day hunger strike in December to demand back wages.

As part of the agreement to end the dispute, the government is calling on regional authorities to organise better tax collection policies. A government spokesman said, "We recommend that teachers and regional authorities should start a negotiating process, and then teachers could get the regional head to sign agreements guaranteeing payment of this year's monthly wages."

British meat inspectors take strike action

UK meat inspectors went on strike for 24 hours on February 2 in a dispute over pay. During the strike most meat production was halted, as no meat is allowed to reach shop shelves without an inspector's stamp of approval.

The strike was organised by the public sector union UNISON and all 1,000 workers participated. UNISON has warned that if no agreement is reached on pay, then it may call strikes of a two or three-day duration. The Meat Hygiene Service, a department of the Ministry of Agriculture that employs the inspectors, has said it is not prepared to pay the workers the 5 percent that UNISON is calling for, and has offered 4.5 percent.

A spokesman for UNISON said, "The dispute over pay is just the end of the line for inspectors who are bullied, threatened with knives and work amid blood and faeces."

Israeli customs workers end dispute

A 10-day strike by customs workers in Israel has ended

following an agreement between the Finance Ministry and representatives of the workers. The workers returned to the ports on February 2 and a spokesman for the ministry said that talks would then begin on the workers' pay demands. The strike began on January 20, with 2,000 workers taking action.

On January 31 the treasury requested a court order to end the dispute. It had led to a backlog of goods being held in ports. Finance Ministry officials said that the wage claim of the customs officials would not be met. Spokesman Eli Yosef said, "We're willing to discuss their demands on a case by case basis, but not if they stray from the agreements by dozens of percentage points and not while they're striking."

During the dispute the customs workers dealt only with medications and perishables. Menahem Levin of the Histadrut labour federation said the government "had two months to meet us and hear our demands but they ignored the matter until we went on strike."

Algerian teachers strike continues

Algerian university teachers have been out on strike since October, paralysing Bab Ezzouar, the main university in Algiers and affecting others schools. They are demanding a wage increase to meet rising costs. If the strike, which is over 100 days old and involves thousands of university teachers, goes beyond February 10, the teachers say they will have to cancel the academic year because the students will not have attended enough lectures.

A spokesman for the Independent High Education Council Union, which is leading the strike, said, "The word dialogue does not exist in the education ministry's dictionary."



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