Workers Struggles: Europe and the Middle East

11 February 1999

The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to editor@wsws.org

German metalworkers strike as talks break down

Thousands of metal and engineering workers took strike action on February 8 as part of a campaign to demand better pay. The strikes were the eighth time that the IG Metall union has called days of action during its negotiations with the employers.

IG Metall workers in the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg struck firms such as Porsche, Alcatel and Bosch. Production at DaimlerChrysler came to a halt as a result of the action. In the state of Bavaria, 15,000 workers from 40 companies, including the early shift at BMW's plant in Regensburg, took strike action for several hours. Workers at a number of plants in the states of Lower Saxony, Rhineland Palatinate and port workers on Germany's northern coast also struck.

Negotiations between the IG Metall and the employers' association ended without agreement on February 9. The talks held in the town of Leinfeld-Echterdingen near Stuttgart in the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg, are part of protracted negotiations over a new pay settlement. No further talks were planned. Berthold Huber, the leading IG Metall negotiator, said, "We will pass a recommendation to the wage commission that the talks have failed." Wage negotiations to be held on February 10 in the states of North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony and Hesse were cancelled.

Klaus Fritsche, a representative of the employers, said, "We are still far apart on finding an acceptable solution." IG Metall has submitted a pay claim of 6.5 percent, which includes an expected productivity increase. The employers' organisation has offered an increase of 2.8 percent.

It has been reported by the business paper *Handelsblatt* that IG Metall was prepared to accept an offer of 4 percent during the talks. The employers refused to offer more than 3 percent.

IG Metall, which represents 2.7 million workers, previously set a deadline of February 11 for the talks to be concluded. It has threatened to ballot its membership for a nation-wide stoppage. A spokesman for the union reported that if its members voted for strike action, the union would still continue to press for talks with the employers. The executive of the IG Metall is meeting in Frankfurt February 14 to decide whether to call a strike ballot.

Italian metalworkers union calls national work stoppage

The FLM metalworkers union in Italy has called a national strike for February 18. The General Assembly also agreed on an immediate overtime ban. The union and the metals industry employers' association, the Federmeccanica, are engaged in talks over the renewal of the National Collective Agreement for Italian metalworkers. The Federmeccanica has raised objections to any union demands for a reduction in working hours.

Port workers in Malta end strike action

Maltese workers at the island's largest port returned to work February 3 following a two-day strike. The dispute began on February 1 when the Malta Freeport Company sacked seven workers who had spoken out against new working hours being imposed by the company.

The United Workers Union called the strike. It was ended after Economics Minister Josef Bonnisi intervened on February 2 and brokered an agreement. No details have yet emerged regarding the agreement, but a union official reported that the sacked workers would be returning to work shortly.

Council workers in Sheffield, England protest

© World Socialist Web Site

privatisation

Over 100 council workers in Sheffield, South Yorkshire have voted for indefinite strike action if the local authority presses ahead with plans to privatise the Housing Benefit department. The staff voted last week 104 to 18 to strike against privatisation of the service. The turnout for the strike ballot was 79 percent.

On February 4 officers at the council said they were recommending that a finance company, CSL, begin running the service in June. In response UNISON, the public sector union representing the workers, said a strike had been called for February 12.

The council is to meet on February 11 to consider its decision to hand over the operations of the Housing Benefit department to CSL. The finance company already runs the Council's Information Technology and Council Tax services following their privatisation in 1998.

London Underground workers to strike for two days

On February 4 London underground tube workers voted to strike for two days to demand better job security. The strikes called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are to begin at 6 p.m. GMT on February 14 and end in the evening of February 16.

The RMT has called the strike to protest the government's decision to partially privatise the Underground. The union represents 6,500 of the Underground's 10,000 workers. Staff fear that jobs could be lost as a result. The privatisation scheme is the flagship of Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, who is responsible for the Transport Ministry in the Blair government. Prescott's scheme is to allow some £7 billion of private capital to be invested in the Underground.

Romanian miners prepare for new strike

Romanian miners are preparing to strike for the second time in two weeks to demand that the local mining company agree to terms set out in its labour contract. On February 9 Miron Cozma, the spokesman for the miners in the Jiu Valley region, said, "One week from now we will launch an all-out stoppage to press for a single demand--observing the rules on the collective labour contract."

Following their last strike, the mining unions agreed to the closures of several pits in a deal with the government. These closures were accepted on the basis that, by cutting the losses of the local mining company by 20 percent, its future would be secured.

Staff workers vote strike against Israeli union federation

Employees of the Histadrut labour federation in Israel voted to take strike action against the union body in protest of non-payment of wages. The staff took strike action on February 7 after the union, which has debts of NIS 3.5 billion, was unable to pay its employees' salaries for January. The monthly wages bill for its workers is NIS 28 million.

At the end of last month the treasurer of Histadrut, Shmuel Avitalthe, told the head of the Histadrut workers committee that salaries would be paid by February 1, or February 3 at the latest. The Histadrut had intended to pay the wage bill by selling off some real estate and land it owns. These deals fell through. The workers committee reported that their protest could develop, as the Israel Land Development Corporation and Ofer Properties have stopped co-operating on real estate transactions with the Histadrut.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site