Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

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German engineering union in last-ditch talks to avert strikes

Twelve thousand workers from General Motors' Opel plant in the town of Ruesselsheim, near Frankfurt, took strike action on February 11. The strike is part of the campaign by engineering workers to increase their pay. Hundreds of thousands of engineering workers have struck in the last three weeks.

The workers held a rally in the town centre and carried banners reading, "Hey boss, I need more cash," while others read simply "6.5 percent" (the pay increase the workers are demanding). IG Metall is currently in talks with the employers' organisation Gesamtmetall in a last attempt to finalise an agreement on the pay award for the 3.2 million workers it represents. Gesamtmetall have offered just 2.3 percent. The union has set a deadline of midnight on February 17 to reach a settlement. If a deal cannot be struck IG Metall has threatened to ballot its membership in the state of Baden-Württemberg next week for strike action. The union has said that if favourable, the strike could begin on March 1.

The last phase of the talks began in the town of Boeblingen on February 17 under the chairmanship of Hans-Jochen Vogel, an ex-leader of the Social Democratic Party.

The union has stated its willingness to accept a lower pay increase on a number of occasions. The latest statement to this effect came on February 16 from one of IG Metall's negotiators, Berthold Huber. Huber said, "Our demands are realistic but of course we have already signalled to the employers that the 6.5 percent pay rise is negotiable. I will not name exact figures, though we expect the final figure to be above 4 percent," he added.

British miners set to vote for strike action

Coal miners in Britain are balloting for strike action over pay raises. On February 12 the 2,000 members of the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM) voted by a 56.1 percent margin for industrial action. The UDM was set up as a strikebreaking organisation during the 1984-85 national miners strike. The recent vote was the first time the UDM ever balloted its members to strike. UDM officials threatened to begin strike action on February 22.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), representing 2,500 miners, is to ballot its members for strike action this week. The dispute is over a pay deal imposed by RJB Mining, the largest private coal operator in the UK, which operates 15 pits. The UDM claims that the deal will lead to below inflation pay rises for five years. On February 15, RJB shares prices fell by 15 percent from 74.5 pence to 63p, as investors feared the impact of a miners strike.

London Underground workers end two-day strike

London Underground workers ended two days of strike action on February 16. The RMT union called the strike to demand job security assurances in face of government plans to partially privatise the tube system. LU management rejected the union's demands as "totally unreasonable" and Prime Minister Tony Blair denounced the strike. LU management said that 70 percent of services ran on the last day of the dispute and that only a few stations were closed. But the RMT said that support for the strike was solid and had cost LU £2 million in lost revenue. The London Chamber of Commerce, which estimated the real total costs of the dispute at £35 million, called for a ban on future tube strikes.

Polish doctors and nurses set to strike as talks break down

Polish doctors and nurses are set to strike indefinitely on February 19 following the failure of talks earlier this week to resolve their dispute. The talks between the All-Poland Medical Doctors' Union and Health Minister

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Wojciech Maksymowicz ended with a statement from the latter that there was no money available to give the staff a pay increase. The doctors and nurses have called the strike to demand a pay increase of 3.5 percent and an increase in finance to the health service.

Spanish telephone workers strike

Workers at Telefonica, the Spanish private phone company, carried out a 24-hour strike February 11 against job cuts. The secretary general of UGT (General Union of Workers) said Telefonica's president, Juan Villalonga, had violated labor relations by acting unilaterally to cut staff. The company, with 52,000 employees, already has one of the highest productivity levels in Europe, according to the union.

Kenyan office workers strike

Office workers striking at the Kenyan Farmers Association brought the headquarters to a halt for the second day on February 11. The 400 Nakuru workers are demanding the payment of 11 months' worth of outstanding wages.

The board of directors had met the previous Wednesday and decided that the employees be paid one month's wages out of a deposit of Sh5 million from the sale of cooperative bank shares. But when inquiries were made to see if the salaries had been paid into the Cooperative Bank at Nakuru it was revealed that the payment had not been approved. Office staff at the Kenyan Farmers Association at Kisumu were also threatening to join the strike

Zimbabwean students demonstrate

Hundreds of angry students held demonstrations at the Harare Polytechnic outside the administration block February 12 demanding the speedy processing of their study loans and grants.

Nelson Chamisa, the students' representative council president, said the action would continue "if no convincing reason is given by the authorities. We are afraid that something could have happened to our money since corruption in government institutions has reached alarming levels." Riot police cordoned off the campus to stop any attempts by the students to march into the streets.

The Zimbabwe Congress of Students Unions (Zicosu) expressed its "disappointment" at the behavior of the riot police at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) and other learning institutions. It said, "The presence of riot police at UZ and other institutions of learning in Harare on February 11 was uncalled for and a mockery of basic principles of freedom and democracy. If students have grievances they cannot be resolved through the riot police."

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