

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

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Polish health workers end strike

Polish doctors and nurses ended their five-day-old strike on February 23. The dispute was called off pending talks with the Health Ministry. The government has said that it will not accept their demand to increase mandatory healthcare premiums to 11 percent of income from the current 7.5 percent.

The strike began on February 19 with doctors and nurses taking action at one-quarter of Poland's hospitals. The head of the health workers' union, Alicja Milewska, said, "Some 20 percent of hospitals took part in the strike on Friday." The strike was called by the Committee for the Defence of the Health Service (KOROZ).

The level of strike activity varied from region to region. In the capital, Warsaw, most of the staff at hospitals and clinics did not participate in the dispute. In the southern town of Czestochowa four out of five hospitals accepted emergency cases only. In the north-western region, the majority of the area's 30 hospitals were affected.

UK miners union calls off strike action

On February 18 the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM) called off a strike due to be held on February 22. The UDM was formed by scabs who broke away from the National Union of Mineworkers in the 1984-85 strike.

Its 4,000 members had voted to strike for a higher pay increase than that proposed by their employers, RJB Mining Plc. The UDM leadership said it has called off the strike in order to hold further talks with the private mining company. The union has set a date of March 1 for strike action if the pay talks fail to reach a settlement.

RJB had offered an annual pay deal of inflation minus 1 percent for five years. For 1999 the company has stated that it will increase pay by just 2.1 percent. The UDM is demanding a raise of 3.1 percent. The National Union of Mineworkers is also balloting its membership for strike action in opposition to the pay deal.

Sheffield council workers to strike against privatisation

Last week, Local Authority Housing Benefit workers in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England voted to take indefinite strike action from March 1 in opposition to the privatisation of the service by Sheffield City Council. Following the strike ballot result, the council said that it may consider keeping the Housing Benefit service within the council if the work force *improved the service*.

The council plans to hand over the running of Housing Benefit to the finance company CSL. It is expected that the contract will be awarded to CSL after the Local Authority elections in May, and that the company would begin to run the service from June.

German public sector unions threaten strike action

Two of Germany's public sector unions, the ÖTV and the DAG white-collar union, together representing 3.2 million workers, have threatened mass strike action to demand higher pay. The unions issued statements on February 23 prior to a walkout by 20,000 civil service workers the following day. On February 25, bus and tram drivers are set to strike nation-wide as part of the campaign to secure a higher pay agreement.

The ÖTV and the DAG are to begin negotiations over pay on February 26. The unions are calling for an increase of 5.5 percent.

Part of the statement of the ÖTV read, "The employers have not yet tabled an offer that we can negotiate on. To strengthen our bargaining position, we need to put on the pressure together with DAG."

German IG Metall union and employers agree pay deal

On February 18 the German metal and engineering union IG Metall and the employers' federation Gesamtmetall reached an agreement on a new pay settlement for the next year. The deal was brokered by the independent mediator Hans-Jochen Vogel, a former SPD justice minister. The agreement covers 840,000 workers in the state of Baden-Württemberg, but is expected to form the basis of a settlement covering IG Metall's 2.7 million members.

The main details of the agreement are:

- a wage increase of 3.2 percent as of March 1, 1999;
- additional payments of DM 350 for January and

February 1999;

- and a one-off payment of 1 percent of the individual contractual monthly wage, multiplied by 12.

Both the IG Metall and Gesamtmetall have until March 2, 1999 to ratify or reject the deal. The contract will cover the period from January 1, 1999 to February 29, 2000. IG Metall is claiming the deal to be a victory, although it is only worth just over half of the 6.5 percent the union originally demanded. During the talks the union consistently emphasised its willingness to compromise.

Russian fleet workers demand unpaid wages

One thousand civilian workers at Russia's northern fleet repair facilities in Murmansk held a rally on February 23 outside the city town hall to demand the payment of two months' unpaid wages. The workers demanded the payment of the wages by the end of February and for their wages to be doubled.

One protester at the demonstration said, "If we continue with such bad financial management, there will be neither a dry dock, nor a fleet." Workers at dry docks on the Far Eastern Kamchatka peninsula, on the Baltic Sea, and in Arkhangelsk, northern Russia, sent messages of support to the Murmansk workers' rally.

The Defence Ministry is indebted to naval shipyards by about 90 million roubles (\$4 million).

Palestinian health workers demand better pay

Palestinian doctors, nurses and health administrators have been on strike for the last week to demand salary increases and improved benefits. The dispute involves 1,200 public sector health workers in the West Bank who have been treating patients on an emergency basis only.

On February 23, some 100 strikers demonstrated outside a session of the Palestinian Legislative Council to demand the council call on the Palestinian Authority to implement a civil service law passed in May. The law obliges salary increases of between 20 and 40 percent and a cost-of-living allowance. A doctor in the Palestinian areas currently earns on average the equivalent of just \$600 a month. It has been estimated that the cost of implementing the law would be \$45 million.

Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat has suspended the law, on the basis that funds are not available to increase workers' pay. Arafat has demanded that the government implement cost-cutting administrative changes and reorganise their budgets.

Hospital doctors strike in Nigeria

Doctors at the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital (UPTH) joined the national strike on February 16 in sympathy with their sacked colleagues at the University of Benin Teaching Hospital, Benin, Jos University Teaching Hospital (JUTH) and Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH).

Prior to the strike Dr. Eric Mangette, chief medical director of UPTH, convened an emergency meeting at which he said that the young doctors should not be involved with the strike. Mangette said support for their sacked colleagues was depriving senior doctors and consultants of assistance and resulted in reduced medical service to patients. Conditions at the hospital have deteriorated badly. For the last three months the hospital has lacked its own electricity and water supply. The hired generators that were relied on for emergency services have also stopped working.

South African farm labourers strike

In response to a farmer's refusal to increase wages by no more than R1.10 to just over R10 (US\$1.68) a day, farm labourers near Nelspruit, South Africa went on strike. Lawrence Mooi, regional secretary of the Agricultural Plantation and Allied Workers, said that 580 workers went out on strike on February 16, after a demand for a R20 increase, later reduced to R4, was rejected by the farm's manager. The farm labourers work a 10-hour day producing bananas, mangoes and sugar cane.

The farm workers have reported Andrea Schoeman, general manager of Laughing Waters Farm, to the Health Department for not issuing protective clothing when they carry out insecticide spraying of the fruit crops. John Khumalo, with several years experience on the farm, said birds and fish that came into contact with the insecticide had died, "but we don't get gloves, hats or masks, not even raincoats for when we have to work in the rain".

Shop Steward Moses Mahwayi was concerned that some of the workers could be deported if Schoeman called the police because they were illegal immigrants from Swaziland and Mozambique. He said, "They've been told that they will call in the police and soldiers to collect the illegal people at night, hoping to discourage us from striking." The strikers are confined to their living quarters and are not allowed to picket on the farm.

A government meeting is to take place on March 1 to set laws regulating the use of Zimbabwean labour by South African farmers. Such cheap labour is used widely in areas of high unemployment along the Northern Province border, and to break strikes.



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