

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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## **German bank employees demonstrate to demand higher pay**

On March 2 bank employees marched through the city of Frankfurt, the finance centre of Germany. They were demanding an increase in the basic salary of the country's 470,000 bank workers.

Hundreds of thousands of workers could be involved in an overtime ban after talks between their union representatives and banking employers broke down later that evening. The unions say that the employers tried to end Christmas bonus payments and cut salary rates in return for a system of performance-related pay. The workers are demanding a pay rise of 6.5 percent. The bank employers are only offering a lump sum payment of 850 marks.

Klaus Carlin, a negotiator for the HBV, the union representing retail, banking and insurance workers, said that his own union and the public sector union DAG would be recommending that workplace councils limit the overtime currently being spent preparing banks for the year 2000 bug.

## **German public sector unions accept pay deal**

On February 27 public sector unions in Germany officially accepted an agreement increasing the wages of millions of state employees by 3.1 percent. They had originally called for a pay increase of 6.5 percent. The previous week saw strikes by thousands of workers employed in the public services in more than 100 towns and cities.

## **Swedish bus drivers strike for better pay**

More than 15,000 bus drivers in Sweden struck on February 25 to demand a pay increase of more than 5 percent and frequent break periods. The strike was called by the Municipal Workers Union. These demands have been rejected outright by the bus companies.

The strike affected all bus routes in Stockholm and many others in towns across the country. A number of inter-city routes were also hit by the dispute. In Stockholm 960,000 people use the bus service on a daily basis. A recent survey found that, due to tight schedules, drivers sit behind the wheel for over five hours without a break and sometimes cannot even go to the lavatory.

## **Ukrainian nuclear power workers protest unpaid wages**

On February 24 Ukrainian nuclear power workers began a series of protests to demand the payment of wages outstanding for months. Olexander Yurkin, the leader of the nuclear plant workers union, said that by February 26 more than 500 workers were taking part in the protests and had set up tents outside the plants. "Our people are ready to be in their camps as long as it is necessary to win," Yurkin said.

The workers are owed the equivalent of nearly \$15 million by the government and have demanded that this be paid by March 6. One of the main concerns of the workers is that it is not possible to maintain adequate standards of safety if employees at the plants are hungry and ill-clad and the nuclear sector is under-funded. Ukraine was the location of the world's worst nuclear disaster in the city of Chernobyl in 1986.

The Ukrainian government has promised to pay the wage arrears and issued a statement from First Deputy Energy Minister Mykhailo Umanets saying, "The government is doing everything possible to pay off all salary debts to our nuclear workers by March 6. We understand very well we have to cover debts to stop these protests."

The five power plants in Ukraine generate nearly 50 percent of all electricity consumed in the country.

## **British miners vote to accept new pay offer**

A strike by British miners was averted on February 26 when members of the Union of Democratic Mineworkers voted to accept a revised pay deal. The UDM was formed by strike-breakers during the 1984-85 miners strike.

The previous week, the 2,000 UDM miners voted to reject an earlier pay proposal from RJB Mining and agreed to begin an indefinite strike at six pits on March 1. This was prevented by the leadership of the union, who entered into another round of talks with RJB.

The new deal will be the first wage increase for miners since 1996. During that period their pay has declined in value by 10 percent.

UDM President Neil Greatrex said: "We are pleased to have reached a compromise. We have improved on the original offer in what we recognise are very difficult times for the coal industry. I always believe when we get to the

stage of strikes somebody has failed."

### **University lecturers in Britain threaten strike action**

The Association of University Teachers (AUT) this week threatened to ballot its members on industrial action if talks with employers do not reach a settlement by April 1. The union is to begin negotiations with university employers on March 19. The AUT is calling for a 10 percent pay increase, stating that its members' salaries have fallen behind other professional groups by more than 35 percent. The union is expected to call for a series of one-day strikes and disruption of exams and admission procedures.

### **British Library staff to take strike action**

Librarians at the British Library in London are to strike in a series of one-day stoppages. The 150 staff are employed loading books onto the library's new automated delivery system. The dispute is expected to last for a month and was called by the Public and Commercial Services Union. The Library is to close six reading rooms for at least a week due to the strike.

The dispute is over changes to work practices that staff claim will reduce earnings and threaten health and safety. One of the changes proposed by management is to end the system of extra payments introduced during the library's move from Bloomsbury to its new St. Pancras location. Half of the staff are being asked to work full-time in four basements, rather than rotating between reading rooms and underground duties.

### **Norwegian unions agree pay freeze with employers**

Norway's unions have agreed to implement a pay freeze for millions of workers during the next financial year. The deal limiting pay rises to 4.5 percent was agreed in talks March 2 between the country's main union confederation, LO, and the main employers' group, the Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry. The unions also agreed to help cut wage growth to match that of Norway's trading rivals by the year 2000.

After the plan was agreed it was given to Labour Minister Eldbjørg Loewer. The report states, "Wage growth from 1998 to 1999 should not be higher than about 4.5 percent and decline to a level to match Norway's trading partners the year after."

The agreement follows a statement last month from Norway's Central Bank chief, Svein Gjedrem, who said that even zero percent pay deals in 1999 would still mean wage growth of around 4.5 to 5 percent due to pay deals outstanding from last year.

### **South African airport strikers arrested**

Airport workers confronted with losing their jobs at the Johannesburg International Airport carried out a protest on February 26, delaying incoming and outgoing flights for over two hours. Forty-three of the workers employed by

Swissport, a ramp handling company, were arrested and face charges of malicious damage to property, resisting arrest and contravention of the National Key Points Act. Thirty-five Swissport workers at the Cape Town International Airport carrying out a similar protest were held and then released as charges were withdrawn.

The workers arrested at the Johannesburg airport were from a group of 100 to 250 protesters who had congregated on the apron. Heavily armed security forces, including police and troops, were sent to break up the protest. The workers are members of the Transport and General Workers Union and the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union. They face the loss of their jobs as Swissport have lost the contract for the services they provided to the airports.

### **Kenyan railway workers strike**

Railway workers at the Kenyan Railway Corporation, Mombasa, went on strike on March 1 demanding their February wages be paid. Rallying at the railway station, they said they would only return to work when their salaries had been paid. Regional personnel officer J. Muthama promised that their cheques had already gone to the bank and were being processed and would be paid within 72 hours. The striking workers refused to accept this, saying they had sent in constant reminders to the corporation, but their salaries had still been delayed.

A spokesman for the workers said, "Each month our salaries are delayed for about two weeks and no explanation is given for the delay. In the past we used to get circulars saying that salaries would be delayed, but these days nobody bothers to tell us why our wages are delayed." Management had given public notice that wages would be paid before the end of the month.

Children of the railway workers have been sent home from school, and those due to enter form one could not do so because there was no money to pay their school fees last year.



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