

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

15 April 1999

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Ukraine hospital workers begin hunger strike over unpaid wages

On April 6, 36 doctors and nurses began a hunger strike in Dzhankoi in northern Crimea, in the Ukraine. The staff began their protest to highlight the fact that they have been unpaid for months.

Olga Turchinina, a spokeswoman for the medical workers union, reported that the workers have not been paid since October last year, and are owed a total of 277,000 hryvnias (\$70,000). She also reported that five protesters had experienced a sharp deterioration in their health since the hunger strike began.

The Dzhankoi hunger strike is only one of many disputes throughout the Ukraine over unpaid wages. The total wage arrears in the region now total over six billion hryvnias (\$1.52 billion).

Iberian Airline threatens to sue pilots after strike

The Spanish airline Iberia has threatened to sue the pilots union Sepla for organising the recent strike of the company. Over an eight-day period at the end of March and the beginning of April, the strike led to the cancellation of more than 400 flights. Sepla called the strike after it accused Iberia of failing to implement the terms of an operations agreement signed in October.

The Director General of Iberia, Angel Mullor, said on April 7 that the airline intended to sue Sepla for four billion pesetas. Iberia is presently negotiating the terms of its 580 billion peseta (\$3.76 billion) privatisation. The company issued a statement, saying of the strike, "It comes in the middle of the privatisation process, with the consequent uncertainty that could be spread among potential investors."

The privatisation of the company is due to begin in June. At present, seven firms have bid to become core shareholders. They would own 30 percent of the capital of the company. British Airways and American Airlines have agreed to buy nine percent and one percent respectively.

Mullor said, "the dispute does not affect any of the institutional investors... but without doubt the damage to our image could affect the public sale." He said the dispute had lost the airline "much more than four billion pesetas" and that 100,000 reservations had been cancelled. A further 170,000

passengers had been lost in the month of April, he said.

Sepla has responded to the threats from Iberia by stating that it estimated that the dispute has cost the company just 400 million pesetas. Prior to the strike the union agreed to maintain 95 percent of services throughout the eight 24-hour stoppages.

Norwegian unions and employers reach wage agreement

On April 12, the major unions and employers in Norway agreed to a pay deal for the 300,000 strong private sector for the next year. As a result many workers will get no extra pay rises for 1999, with the exception of those that are part of a two-year pact agreed in 1998.

The agreement means that a threatened strike by 30,000 workers in the private sector has now been averted. The main unions had planned to call about a tenth of their members out on indefinite strike from April 12 if a deal was not reached.

The negotiations were not able to resolve the long-standing issue of who would fund new training and education courses for workers to acquire new skills. Both parties agreed to postpone making a decision on this until the year 2000.

Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik said on April 10 that the government would support education schemes by investing 400 million crowns (\$51.7 million) over two to three years.

Romanian general strike threatened

On April 8, several of Romania's most prominent trade unions announced that they would call strike action later this month, after accusing the government of breaking promises to reverse austerity measures.

President Emil Constantinescu met with the Cartel Alfa trade union group and leaders of the coalition government and other political parties on April 7. He said that austerity measures were unavoidable and that a new loan accord with the International Monetary Fund had to be finalised. The economy is in the midst of a severe crisis and has shrunk for the third consecutive year.

Constantinescu's government has opposed any suggestion of a foreign debt servicing default. Further negotiations between the IMF and the government are to be held in Bucharest this week.

Bogdan Hossu, the leader of the Cartel Alfa, said, "We told the president it was unacceptable that the government should say one thing and then not do it. Our action programme will not change." Following the negotiations, the main unions announced that a two-hour nation-wide strike would take place on April 19. This is to be followed by a general strike one week later.

The four main unions in Romania organise four million workers and the strike will involve road, rail and air transport, and other major industries. Many of these industries are state-owned. Hossu said that the strikes would not take place if the government agreed to relax austerity measures. "The government has another 11 days to make good on its promises. That's ample time, if they move quick."

The average wage for a worker in Romania is the equivalent of a \$100 a month.

Czech miners union given role in privatisation

A miners strike was averted in the Czech republic at the beginning of April, after the government agreed to give the mining unions a prominent role in the forthcoming privatisation of the industry, it was revealed last week.

The April 1 agreement between the government and the unions resulted in the unions being granted a role in establishing the conditions for the sale of state interests in three brown-coal mines in north Bohemia. The privatisation is expected to begin after the June presidential elections.

Miners at three brown-coal (lignite) mines in north Bohemia--Mostecka uhelna spolecnost (MUS) in Most, Sokolovska uhelna in Sokolov and Severoceske doly in Chomutov--threatened strike action following speculation that foreign investors were planning to close down the mines. This threat of industrial action led to the meeting between the government and the unions on April 1.

An adviser for the Union of Mining Employees, Vlastimil Altner, said that privatisation "could only happen after the elections because the conditions are so complicated." One of the union's main demands is to prevent foreign investors from privatising the mines.

The strike alert prompted an April 1 summit between union and Cabinet leaders.

It is unclear exactly how much of the coal industry is actually under state ownership, as private investors have been buying non-state shares in mining firms for some time. It is believed that a "wild privatisation" will take place, in which the government's leading role will be reduced, with the investors setting the terms.

Speaking of one of the mining firms, MUS, Finance Minister Ivan Pilip said the state might have already lost its controlling interest. "It cannot be ruled out that someone other than the state controls more than 50 percent of MUS" he said.

Bram Buring, an analyst of the Brno Broker Group, said that the government "have no other choice" than to privatise quickly. In effect the MUS mine "has already been privatised", he said.

Namibian miners protest

Mineworkers at the Navachab gold mine near Karibib demonstrated on Tuesday, April 13 outside the main gate, protesting against unhealthy working conditions. The dispute, over conditions in the metallurgy plant, has been going on since the middle of January. Workers have complained of being

confronted with disciplinary action from the management.

A representative of the miners, who did not want to be named, said the workers had been complaining, without success, about health conditions in an oxygen-starved ore mill. They have had to perform strenuous physical work in intense heat for up to eight hours, leading to miners collapsing at work or at home later.

An agreement exists between Navachab management and the Mineworkers Union of Namibia, enabling workers to leave the place they are working if they believe that their safety is threatened. But those who have attempted to implement it have been disciplined for refusing to carry out lawful instructions. Those who have persisted have been given final warnings of dismissal.

Risk assessments were carried out and a report drawn up on the conditions in the mine last year, but the miners have been refused the right to see it. The spokesman for the miners said, "We want to see what's in the assessment report. If we feel it is unsafe, we should be allowed to leave the place until a proper investigation has been done"

Nigerian state workers go on strike

Millions of Nigerian state workers in 28 states, out of 36 overall, struck on April 13 to demand the implementation of the 3,000 naira minimum wage agreed on by the federal government of General Abdulsalaam Abubakar last September.

An initial agreement of 5,200 naira was set, then reduced to 3,500 for federal and 3,000 for state workers on the basis that the price of oil had fallen and the military government could no longer afford the original increase.

The police used tear gas to break up an April 7 demonstration demanding the payment of arrears in the northern state of Taraba. Thousands of workers in the state of Adamawa marched on government offices, demanding implementation of the wage agreement. Sixteen industrial actions have taken place in February and March this year.

Military governors in some states who claim that they cannot afford the new wage structure are threatening to lay off up to 60 percent of the workers if they persist in demanding the minimum wage. The Central Working Committee of the Nigeria Labour Congress is directing the strike.



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