

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

8 July 1999

Greek Olympic Airways staff strike over UK management deal

Staff at the Greek state carrier, Olympic Airways, staged a one-day strike on July 1 to protest against a contract giving the management of the firm to a British Airways subsidiary, Speedwing. Hundreds of Olympic Airways workers marched to the transport ministry in Athens to protest against the contract that they believe will lead to job losses.

The dispute resulted in the cancellation of 46 out of 77 scheduled domestic and international flights. A union official representing the workers said, "We will hold another 24-hour strike next week—probably next Wednesday—and many more in the near future unless the government cancels this deal with Speedwing which will shrink Olympic and eventually close it down."

The deal giving the contract to the British firm for 30 months was signed last week. One clause of the contract awards a "success fee" of \$1.5 million for meeting financial and commercial targets to Speedwing, who will also receive a \$2.5 million premium if the airline returns to profitability in that time.

The government has declared that the Speedwing deal is the last chance if the company is to avoid bankruptcy. Finance Minister Yannis Papandoniou said "Olympic's survival is now exclusively up to the management and the workers. We can't continue to subsidise a company that is always in the red."

Bus and tram workers in Romania strike to demand more pay

On July 6, bus and tram drivers in the Romanian capital of Bucharest took unofficial strike action to demand an increase in pay. The strike had a major impact on the city as its 2.2 million inhabitants were forced to make alternative travel arrangements. The action delayed the start of year-end high school graduation examinations. The drivers are demanding a

wage increase of sixty percent.

The strike coincided with a demonstration by subway workers who are opposing plans to privatise the utility.

The manager of the Bucharest public transport authority (RATB) Constantin Popescu said, "The drivers participating in this unannounced and illegal strike will be sued by the administration. Those who will not return to work will be sacked."

Drivers had last week agreed to a 30 percent pay increase bringing their monthly wages to the equivalent of \$240, more than twice the national average. Trade union leaders said they wanted the new figure to be doubled.

In another dispute 3,000 workers at the Tepro steel pipe maker in the eastern city of Iasi began strike action to oppose the proposed sacking of three-quarters of the workforce by the factory's the plant's new Czech owners.

Polish nurses threaten to begin a hunger strike in dispute over pay

A Polish nurses' trade union said that nearly half of the country's 240,000 nurses would begin a hunger strike this week to demand an increase in pay. The threatened hunger strike is the culmination of a series of protest marches and rallies that have taken place over the last six weeks. The nurses want a 10 percent increase in their 700 zloty (\$180) average monthly salaries and a more secure employment contract.

On July 6, Bozena Banachowicz, the leader of nurses union said, "The government has decided to ignore our demands... If no negotiations begin, about 100,000 nurses in the entire country will go on a hunger strike on Thursday."

Recent opinion polls have been supportive of the nurses and their treatment has been cited as one of the main reasons for the unpopularity of the present government. The union said that the hunger strike would not pose a threat to hospital patients.

The government has rejected the demands of the

nurses and stated that they should negotiate separate pay rises with local hospital management bodies, which it claims have been given money as a result of recent legislation. The union countered these claims saying that low overall funding for the health system had forced the hospitals to spend the money for more essential needs, such as medicine.

In total, the health care funds receive just 7.5 percent of taxpayers' incomes. The government spent 22 billion zlotys (\$5.6 billion) on the public health system this year. This amount is one of the lowest in Europe in per capita terms.

The nurses are set to hold a demonstration in Warsaw on July 9.

Strike by Albanian airport workers ends

A strike by staff at Albania's international airport ended on June 30 when the government agreed to grant workers a 30 percent pay increase. The previous week, 150 workers struck to demand a pay increase of 50 percent. The strike halted all commercial flights to and from Tirana's Rinas airport. The action did not affect NATO or aid flights to and from Kosovo.

General Strike in Burkina Faso

The first general strike in Burkina Faso since 1975 was held on June 29 and 30. The strike was to demand better pay and conditions and protest against the government's brutal privatisation measures.

The strikers also took up the case of the suspicious death of Norbert Zongo, an investigative journalist whose body, alongside three of his companions, was found charred in a burnt out car on a country road.

They are demanding that his death does not go unpunished. The two-day general strike was called by the country's seven central labour unions, paralysing the government treasury and tax offices. Banks, hospitals and the state run telephone company as well as water and power services provided only minimum services. On-going strikes and street protest have affected the country since the death of the journalist in December. The government has agreed to bring to justice any officials found to be implicated in Norbert Zongo's death.

General Strike in Senegal

A two-day general strike was held also in Senegal, on June 28 and 29, the first in 7 years. The international airport was brought to a standstill, as was much of the economy, as workers demanded an increase in pay and

benefits.

Although the private sector has agreed to a general pay rise, the government has said it needs to review its fiscal position, as it cannot afford any increases in spending. The strike ended with a split in the unions after the National Union of Independent Trade Unions (UNSAS) and the umbrella organisation of Independent Trade Unions (CAS/Confederation) walked out of negotiations with the employers. The unions signing the agreement included the National Confederation of Senegalese Workers, which is affiliated to the ruling Socialist Party. The General Secretary of UNSAS, after walking out of negotiations at midnight, said, "What had been proposed is not agreeable to us and we had to leave after refusing to associate our name and signature."



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