

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

9 September 1999

## Postal workers in Britain reject new pay offer

Postal workers in Britain voted this week to reject a pay offer from their employer, Royal Mail. The workers rejected the pay deal by a narrow margin, against the recommendation of their union, the Communication Workers Union. The CWU, which represents 160,000 workers, had agreed to the pay deal after three years of talks that followed a national postal workers strike in 1996.

Royal Mail said that the deal was the equivalent to a pay rise of 18 percent and would have made the basic pay of postal workers fully pensionable. The company said that basic pay would have risen to £238 a week from the present £201. But the agreement also stipulated that overtime rates would be cut from October 2000. Many workers are thought to have rejected the deal because of this clause.

CWU Deputy General Secretary John Keggie sought to play down the deal's rejection. "It is a sad reflection on working for the Post Office that overtime is of such concern to so many of our members. This is not a criticism of the decision, but the result of decades of decay where basic pay was poor and hours were long. Many see overtime payments as the only way to scrape together a living wage," he said.

Following the vote the CWU made a call for further negotiations with Royal Mail

## Irish train drivers strike postponed

The Labour Relations Commission and its Chief Executive Kieran Mulvey postponed a planned strike by 50 train drivers employed by the Irish Rail Company on September 5. The 24-hour strike was due to take place the following day and would have hit some 50,000 train users in Dublin. The strike was to have been followed up by two-, three- and four-day stoppages.

The dispute began after the company proposed to

train new drivers on a planned new route to Greystones and Malahide. Irish Rail wanted to recruit the new drivers from outside the usual train driver grades.

The drivers recently rejected an offer of £8,000 that was made following the intervention of the Labour Court into the dispute. The drivers are calling for an additional payment of £11,000 for those who work the route.

The training plan has now been deferred and Irish Rail management is to meet later this week with the officials from the trade union federation SIPTU, the National Bus and Rail Workers Union and officials from the Labour Relations Commission and Labour Court.

## Teachers union in Serbia calls off strike

A three-day teachers strike in Serbia was called off on September 3 by the country's largest teachers union, the Association of Teachers Unions. The strike began after a dispute with the education authorities over non-payment of wages. Teachers are owed three months of back pay and earn on average around 1,350 dinars (\$70) a month.

The strike was supported by teachers in 60 schools and began at the start of term on September 1. The union said that it did not rule out further strike action in the future.

## Romanian miners occupy pit to demand better pay and conditions

On September 1, 500 coal miners began a strike and occupied the Zegujani mine in southern Romania. The miners began their protest to demand an increase in pay and better working conditions. They are calling for a pay bonus of 1.5 million lei (90 dollars) per employee.

The employer, the National Lignite Company called the strike illegal and filed a law suit against the miners after the second day of the strike. The company said those on strike were in breach of company policy that

forbids its employees from remaining in the pits for more than 12 hours in one shift.

The occupation is the latest in a series of protests and strikes by Romanian miners since the beginning of the year.

### **Hospital workers, classroom assistants and garbage workers strike in Israel**

On September 7, workers at state hospitals throughout Israel took strike action for 24 hours to protest against government cuts in the health budget. The strike affected 15 hospitals, but labour and delivery rooms, dialysis units and emergency surgical procedures were maintained. Hospital management reverted to a Saturday schedule in order to lessen the impact of the strike.

On the same day talks between treasury officials and representatives of municipal garbage workers, who are also in dispute, broke down without agreement. The strike has hit all the major cities in Israel and schools had to close early on September 7, due to the stench emanating from rotting garbage nearby. Kindergarten schools had to close early recently due to a strike by classroom assistants.

### **Kenyan teachers threaten strike over salaries**

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Teachers in Kenya are poised to strike unless their salaries for August are released. More than 600 teachers have not been paid, and it is likely that all Kenyan teachers will strike in solidarity.

Their union, the Kenya National Union of Teachers, has asked the new head of the Civil Service, Dr. Richard Leakey, to study the files on teachers' salaries. They are demanding implementation of the second and third stages of a phased pay increase. But Leakey is currently overseeing massive cuts throughout the civil service.

### **Sierra Leone lecturers strike Teacher Training Colleges**

A sit-down strike by lecturers at the country's six Teacher Training Colleges is now under way. At least 3,000 students are affected, a third of whom are in the final year of their academic work.

The strike results from non-payment of workers' salaries. Senior lecturers complain that salaries have not been paid for the past four months. The Lecturers Association for Teacher Training Colleges has served

notice to the Education Ministry for payment of salaries, saying they will not resume work if payments are not met.

### **Figures show extent of South African strike wave**

The number of man-days lost through strikes in South Africa reached 3.8 million in 1998, according to the Department of Labour's annual report, released on September 6. Striking workers lost more than 43 million rand in wages.

The vast majority of these disputes arose from collective bargaining disagreements, with 71 percent centred on wages. Most occurred in the private sector (49 percent), while strikes by government workers made up 40 percent.

At 2,440,406, the manufacturing industry lost more man-days than any other sector. The next largest loss was the financial services industry at 700,000, followed by mining at 266,583.

### **Jobs losses threatened in South African building and manufacturing trades**

Up to 52,000 jobs in the building and civil engineering industries could be destroyed by the end of the year, according to the Building Industry Federation of South Africa (BIFSA) and the South African Federation of Civil Engineering Contractors (SAFCEC), the industry employers' organisation. Bifsa's chief executive officer said 30,000 of these jobs would be in the building industry and the rest in the civil engineering industry.

Meanwhile 900 workers employed by the fridge manufacturer Kelvinator are to lose their jobs following the company's provisional liquidation. Although production increased from 175 units a day in 1996 to 1000 units a day at the end of September 1997, competition was too fierce. Swaziland-based Fridgemaster, which has about 50 percent of the South African market, had a sharp advantage over Kelvinator due to its lower labour costs. It paid workers only R2,50 an hour against Kelvinator's R10,01 an hour, a union spokesman said.



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