

Workers Struggles: Europe, Africa and the Middle East

5 November 1999

Romanian truck manufacturing workers protest over pay

Eight thousand workers at major Romanian truck maker Roman SA protested Thursday against management's failure to observe an accord to increase their wages. The workers rallied around the plant, located in the Transylvanian city of Brasov, demanding higher wages and job security, and calling for managers to resign.

Under an accord signed in July, the Brasov workers were promised a 15 percent wage increase in October and November. But a shortage of funds due to thinning orders had prevented such a move last month, management said.

The accord also tied the pay rises to some 4,400 layoffs and to the restructuring of the plant, one of the biggest truck makers in Eastern Europe. The truck maker in Brasov is among dozens of debt-ridden Romanian companies that investors want to restructure or privatise.

Romania students strike

Thousands of Romanian students protested last week in Bucharest demanding higher grants and better hostel conditions. More than 5,000 students converged on the central University Square in the capital, rattling plastic bottles filled with pebbles. They blocked traffic through the square, where hundreds of people were shot during the December 1989 protests that led to the fall of the Stalinist Ceausescu regime.

The students are demanding an increase in educational spending of US\$8 million, which would double monthly grants to the equivalent of \$16 and hostel subsidies to \$8.

"We have called an indefinite strike in most academic centres, after the authorities rejected our demands," said Luis Lazarus, head of the all-country students' association.

Nearly 10 years after the collapse of Stalinism and the promises of a new prosperity with the introduction of the capitalist market, little has been done to improve conditions in campuses around the country's mainly state-funded colleges. Students often have to offer bribes just to secure a bed in a hall of residence.

Telecom Italia workers strike

Telecommunication workers in Italy staged a one-day strike on Wednesday, October 27 to demand government intervention into the restructuring plans of Telecom Italia.

The plan proposes a partial spin-off of Telecom Italia's 60 percent stake in mobile unit TIM into Tecnost. Workers are concerned that this and other measures proposed by the company could result in 13,000 layoffs at the former state monopoly. A UIL trade union leader said 60 percent of telecom employees had joined the strike.

"The financial choices which have emerged from the company in recent days seem to point to a dismantling of the core business and a policy of redundancies ... which is unjustified in a sector which is in growth," UIL telecom General-Secretary Luigi Ferrando said in a statement.

Polish miners protest closure of coal mine

A series of protests by miners throughout Poland has taken place in response to the government's programme of mine closures and layoffs. Miners from the Siersza mine in southern Poland staged a mock funeral on November 1 while others occupied the company headquarters. Some miners are reported to be on hunger strike.

The Siersza mine employs 1,600 people. It is being closed as part of government plans to restructure what they refer to as "the largely unprofitable coal mining industry". The state hopes to reduce subsidies to the mining sector and cut 40 percent of all coal mining jobs over the next three years.

Zambian miners determined to strike

Cameron Pwele, branch chairman of the Luanshya Mine Workers Union of Zambia, has confirmed that members of the branch will go ahead with their planned strike, in spite of the continued presence of paramilitary police and Zambia army commandos in the town. Pwele said they were unhappy with management's treatment of the workers and this had strengthened their resolve to stage the strike. He said the workers felt they were better off in the days before the privatisation of the mine than now.

Pwele said the paramilitary and army personnel had not harassed any of his members, "There are a number of officers around but we're not changing our position.... The workers are nevertheless determined to go ahead with the strike because these new investors are making our life worse off than before the mine was sold to them."

Over 500 paramilitary officers and commandos had been deployed to stop a strike from taking place, Pwele said. He called on the investors, the Binani Group of Companies, to leave because they had failed to improve the workers' living standards. The law enforcement officers and army personnel were deployed last Sunday at areas around and within Roan Antelope Mining Corporation (RAMCOZ) following the miners' plan to stage a strike.

University of Zimbabwe students tortured

Security officers at the University of Zimbabwe allegedly detained and tortured three students on the campus for taking part in student demonstrations last week. Students were protesting against the late disbursement of their grants. They also charged

that the loans they receive were insufficient for their expenses.

The demonstrations led to clashes with riot police, who had sealed off the campus to prevent the students from moving into the city centre. Tichaona Chirasa, a law student who was one of the three tortured, said they were picked up at random by the campus security officers on Wednesday morning and were tortured until midnight of that day. He said the other two were handed over to the Avondale police station afterwards. An officer at the police station confirmed that a number of university students were still being held at the station for offences connected with the demonstration.

The students say the security officers demanded that they explain why they had been demonstrating and divulge the plans of the Students' Executive Council (SEC). Chirasa said the students were beaten with sticks by a mob of officers and showed reporters their injuries. "They were beating me and made me do exercises such as press-ups and accused me of having attended an extraordinary meeting organised by SEC. They actually forced me to write a report and sign that I had given the information freely," said Chirasa, who says that he is not part of the SEC.

Togolese teachers continue strike

Togolese teachers are continuing their strike, which started October 18, to demand the payment of two to six months' salary arrears, entitlements and family allowances. They are also demanding payment of subsidies to privately run educational institutions (also in arrears), the integration of contract workers and assistants into the civil service, and the adjustment of teachers' salaries in private schools in line with those of public schools.

The Co-ordination of Teachers' Unions, Federations and Associations held a news conference Thursday in Lome to publicise the issues behind the strike.

The Federation of Education Workers and the National Organisation of Independent Unions in Togo called for a peaceful protest November 8 in Lome. The Togolese authorities, while acknowledging the legitimacy of the strikers' demands, have asked them to be patient, citing the country's financial difficulties.

Strike at Parmalat in South Africa enters third month

Workers at Parmalat, formerly Bonnita, called on company management to "stop negotiating in bad faith" so that their current strike could come to an end. The Food and Allied Workers' Union (Fawu) strike entered its third month this week with no sign of either side backing down. Fawu local officer Zola Masumpa said the union was still demanding an 8 percent increase across the board based on a one-year agreement. Parmalat was offering an 8 percent increase but based on a three-year agreement, rather than one year.

On October 25 Parmalat notified striking employees that they might still be locked out by the end of the year if they did not instruct union officials to sign the collective agreement with the company. According to management figures, the strikers have lost more than R7 million (US\$1.14 million) in wages and the company had lost between R25 million and R30 million (US\$4.07-4.9 million) due to the strike.

Pay us back, say 12,000 South African teachers

About 12,000 members of the South African Teachers' Union (SATU) had one day's pay deducted from their salaries, though

they had not taken part in the public servants' salary strike earlier this year, SATU said on Monday

The union says it plans to institute civil claims to have the money—amounting to about R2.4 million (US\$390,000)—paid back, SATU spokesman Chris Kloppers said. Some union members applied for leave to be able to participate in the action, but their applications were simply ignored. They were never informed that their applications had been refused. The union was conducting a survey among its members to determine who had been affected, and would then institute civil claims against the provincial heads of department, he said.

Kloppers called on Democratic Party MP Mannoetjies Grobler (who supports the government's "no work, no pay" policy) and public service and administration minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi to investigate why the deductions were made.

Jerusalem Post journalists declare dispute

The National Federation of Israel Journalists declared a labour dispute October 28 on behalf of journalists at the *Jerusalem Post*, Israel's oldest English-language daily.

The announcement followed management's declaration the previous day that it was cancelling the collective agreement, under which most of the paper's journalists are employed. The agreement expires on December 31. On September 16, management presented the journalists' staff committee with its submission for a revised contract.

Management proposals cut back virtually all benefits to the minimum required by law, increase working hours and slash salaries. In a direct attack on the collective bargaining strength of the workforce, the new agreement stipulates that all newly hired journalists will be on a "personal contract". The contract also removes all protection from dismissal "for whatsoever reason or without a reason." Journalists fear that this could lead to a purging of the workforce.

The *Jerusalem Post* is part of Hollinger, Inc., a multinational media empire headed by Conrad Black and encompassing some 600 publications, including the British *Daily Telegraph* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Since Hollinger bought the paper 10 years ago it has dismissed more than half its journalists and tried repeatedly to break the union.

Under Israeli law, a 14-day "cooling off" period must follow the declaration of a labour dispute. During this period both sides are summoned before the national supervisor of labour relations. Only after the 14 days can workers take collective action.



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