

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

18 November 1999

Introduction of 35-hour week in France provokes strikes

On November 16, broadcasting workers from state radio and television took strike action to demand better pay and more jobs. The workers took the industrial action in several cities including Paris. The strike began at 2300 GMT and continued for a further 24 hours. The strike led to the non-appearance of news bulletins and other scheduled programmes.

The strike was called by a number of broadcasting unions who are demanding that new jobs be created when the working week is reduced to 35 hours next January.

In Lyon, public transport workers struck for 24 hours to demand better pay and working conditions in talks with management over the 35-hour week. In Marseilles, buses and underground trains failed to run as striking workers demanded an increase in pay.

A strike by cleaning staff on the Paris Metro system, who are demanding better conditions with the introduction of the 35-hour workweek, has led to a build-up of rubbish at stations on two of the city's 14 underground lines.

French auto component workers strike over pay

Auto workers in Hambach, eastern France, who manufacture parts for DaimlerChrysler's Smart minicar, took strike action last week to demand an increase in pay. The strike began on November 10, and on November 14 the workers voted to continue their action after rejecting a new pay offer from management.

The Canadian-owned auto components firm Magna employs 65 workers in Hambach. Magna also faces a strike from workers at its door-making operations and the Surtrema painting facility following a dispute.

Romanian steelworkers protest against privatisation

Fifteen hundred steelworkers in northeastern Romania held a demonstration and blocked a major road on November 16 to protest against the

privatisation of the company that employs them and massive job losses. The Petrotrub steel pipe manufacturer is to be taken over by the Gibraltar-based firm Tubman International Ltd. Tubman signed an agreement with the Romanian government the previous day to purchase a 70 percent stake in Petrotrub for \$42.6 million. The deal specifies that Tubman pay off Petrotrub's debt of \$39 million and eliminate around 1,500 of the company's 3,000 workers' jobs.

Railway workers protest in Bucharest

On November 10, 4,000 rail workers marched through Bucharest to demand a wage increase from the state rail company SNCFR. The railway workers are demanding a 24 percent wage increase, better conditions and that their pay be linked to inflation.

Another demand of the workers is for an end to the restructuring of the SNCFR, which has led to the loss of 140,000 workers jobs this year—57 percent of its workforce.

They are also calling for the resignation of Transport Minister Traian Basescu, who declared the demonstration illegal. Basescu said, "A wage increase is out of the question. The reorganisation of the SNCFR into several commercial companies will go ahead as planned. This is the only solution to cut losses."

In the evening, 800 of the workers blockaded the rail track at the main Gara de Nord station stopping trains from leaving the capital. The government sent troops to the blockade, which dispersed around midnight after the SNCFR agreed to discuss the workers' demands.

Romanian students demand higher grants, better conditions

On November 10, hundreds of Romanian students protested in Bucharest to demand higher grants and better educational and living facilities. The students are demanding that their monthly grants be doubled to the equivalent of \$16 and that their subsidy for hostel accommodation be raised to \$8. The government has stated that it will gradually double the grants over the

first 10 months of next year, but will not bring in the measure immediately.

The students demonstrated outside government offices in the capital city and at the University Square in the centre of the city. The government deployed riot police with shields and batons in order to prevent the demonstration spreading. The same day representatives of the students were meeting officials of Prime Minister Radu Vasile's government.

A leader of the students at Bucharest University, Luis Lazarus, said of the talks, "It was a waste of time. We will continue our protests until our demands are met."

British Telecom call centre staff vote to strike

This week it was announced that workers from across British Telecommunications (BT) 37 call centres have voted to strike for 24 hours on November 22. Around 4,000 workers were balloted by the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) with approximately a 50 percent turnout.

The strike will be the first official industrial action the company has faced for 10 years. The strike has been organised to protest against increased management surveillance and intimidation in the work environment. Other grievances are that the call centres are under-resourced, poorly managed and are highly dependent on contract staff.

A spokesman for the company said that it would welcome talks with the CWU in a bid to prevent the strike. Last week the company posted second-quarter profits of £890 million (\$1.44 billion), an increase of 10.6 percent. The announcement triggered an increase of BT's share price by more than 9 percent on the day.

Bank merger could result in 10,000 job losses

South Africa's fourth-largest bank, Nedcor, will cut 10,000 jobs if its proposed merger with the Standard Bank Investment Corporation (Stanbic) goes through. The number of staff at the combined operation will drop from the current 50,000 to 40,000 within the next three years, Nedcor has announced.

The Nedcor banking conglomerate has been planning to acquire control of Stanbic for some time. Despite having been rebuffed by Stanbic on previous occasions, the group denied it was staging a hostile take-over bid and insisted that it was still talking in terms of a "friendly merger". If the bid succeeds, the merged group will be South Africa's largest bank, with a market capitalisation of about R57 billion (US\$9.3 billion).

Ugandan Pepsi workers strike, CEO suspended

About 400 workers at Crown Bottlers Limited, Nakawa, laid down tools on November 12, and started a sit-down strike. They were demanding the sacking of the CEO, alleging that "he has been applying an apartheid kind of rule", being arrogant and mistreating them.

The striking workers became angry when CEO Gavin Ruud appeared at the plant's premises that morning, and barred him from entering the offices. They threatened not to work under his authority any more.

Ruud had been CEO for the company that produces Pepsi Cola products for the past 18 months. The sit-down strike was called off at about 9:30 a.m., after the company chairman talked to the workers and promised to take action. The Board of Directors has since suspended Ruud.



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