

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

2 December 1999

Cyprus Airways staff to strike on December 11

Cyprus Airways staff are to strike for 24 hours on December 11 to demand a pay increase of 2.5 percent. Three trade unions representing 1,500 of the 1,800 employees of the airline have called the strike. Costas Demetriou, a spokesman, said the pay increase had been pending since 1997. "We are the only section of the population which has not received pay increases from 1995," he said. The unions said they called the strike on a day that does not coincide with the peak holiday period, which begins on December 18. Cyprus Airways said that they want to discuss a pay increase but only as part of a deal to increase productivity and cut costs.

Romanian workers march to protest government austerity measures

Thousands of workers from many industries marched through Bucharest on November 24 to protest against the decline in living standards. The demonstration was called by a coalition of the largest unions, which have warned that more protests and strikes will take place unless the government listens to their demands. Many protesters called for the removal of the government of Prime Minister Radu Vasile.

The protest culminated outside the offices of Vasile in a public square in the northern part of the city. Riot police surrounded the square and pushed back the protesters on several occasions. The protesters chanted "Thieves! Thieves!" and other anti-government slogans. The government has pledged to continue its program of privatisation and budget cutting. Last week Vasile said the government will continue the steps taken in 1999, irrespective of how unpopular they are.

Workers at turkey producers in England vote to strike over pay

Staff at Britain's Bernard Matthews' turkey producer have voted to strike to demand a pay increase. Two thousand workers at several of the company's factories voted for the industrial action to press for a pay rise of 4.6 percent. The company has offered 2.6 percent. Workers at Bernard Matthews factories in Great Witchingham, Norfolk, and Holton, Suffolk, voted against taking industrial action. A strike could have an impact on turkey supplies throughout

the UK in the run-up to Christmas. A strike date has not yet been set.

Spanish soccer players vote to strike to demand unpaid wages

Last week soccer players in the Spanish third division club Hercules announced that they planned to take strike action in protest at not being paid in September and October. Club captains Jose Ignacio Conte, Paquito Escudero and Josip Visnjic said, "We are exercising our rights to strike." The protest is to go ahead on December 1, 2 and 3. The decision to strike followed a meeting of all the players in the squad, who agreed to this course of action. Hercules club officials said that they regretted the players taking industrial action and were looking into ways of paying the players.

Scottish postal workers walk out in unofficial strike

Postal workers in the west of Scotland took unofficial strike action on November 24 in a dispute over working arrangements during the Christmas period. More than 1,100 walked off the job for two days at the Royal Mails sorting office in Springburn, Glasgow. The Springburn workers were quickly supported by 1,500 staff at 22 delivery offices around the city.

The dispute was triggered by the Royal Mail management's refusal to pay overtime to workers who do not volunteer for "pressure" shifts—the long pre-Christmas shifts. Workers were also opposing the level of non-contracted temporary staff to be employed for the Christmas rush.

One of the mail workers said the strike was centred on management's proposal to use non-contracted temporary staff to code. "Coding is the most important duty for the throughput of mail and especially at this time of the year, it is the highest priority. This dispute is essentially about the number of hours being given to temporary staff when we are all supposed to get the same hours, including temporary staff."

The dispute was immediately repudiated by the Communications Workers Union (CWU), which had already signed an agreement with Royal Mail over Christmas arrangements. A spokesman for the CWU told the BBC, "The strike action is not legal because the workers have not been balloted. You have to ballot the members and give the employers seven days' notice before you can take strike

action so we repudiate it and would urge our members to call it off immediately."

The dispute is the latest in a series of unofficial strikes in the Royal Mail—there have been 21 in the last four years.

Earlier this year, 2,000 postal workers in the East of Scotland struck successfully to reinstate a colleague sacked during disagreements over the delivery of listings and TV magazines. The strike, which began in Livingston, quickly spread to Grangemouth and Glenrothes. One month ago 52 postal workers struck in the Govan post office, again in Glasgow, over aggressive and bullying management behaviour.

Glasgow council workers strike leader expelled by union

Roddy Slorach, one of the leaders of an unofficial strike in 1998 against the privatisation of local government services in Glasgow, has been expelled by the public service workers union, Unison. Slorach has been a member of Unison for nine years and a shop steward for most of that time. He was expelled for supposedly "bringing the union into disrepute" during the unofficial strike, when press reports quoted him calling for defiance of the anti-union laws and criticising Unison's general secretary, Rodney Bickerstaffe.

The eight-day council workers strike caused a wave of alarm in the Scottish media and in the ruling Labour group in Glasgow City Council. One thousand two hundred council workers walked out on hearing of the City Council's decision to sack three Unison members for refusing to participate in a "best value" scheme to cut costs in the provision of home-helps. The sacked workers were adhering to a previous decision by the local Unison branch.

Slorach, a member of the Socialist Workers Party, was targeted by vicious red-baiting headlines. Since the strike, two strikers have been sacked and 27 disciplined.

NGO exposes farm slavery

The Transvaal and Rural Action Committee (TRAC) non-governmental organisation (NGO) has exposed the practices of farmers in Mpumalanga who treat their workers like slaves. TRAC deputy director Craig Jacobs said the organisation had received a flood of complaints about the abuse of farm labourers since opening new offices in Nelspruit earlier this month. Jacobs said Trac would fight against illegal evictions, child labour and the harmful effects of pesticides on farm workers and the environment.

Two of the organisation's field workers have been shot at in the past while conducting interviews on farms in the province. "Farmers regard us as a threat, because they still treat farmworkers as slaves," said Jacobs.

South African victims of asbestosis in bid for compensation

Lawyers representing around 3,000 victims of asbestosis

from the Northern Cape and the Northern Province of South Africa have declared their intention to take their battle for compensation to the British House of Lords, due to the lack of funding for such cases in South Africa. In the UK claimants would be entitled to legal aid in funding their expensive suit. The appeal will probably be the miners' final chance for compensation. If they are allowed to appeal, the case will probably not be heard before April 2000.

Striking farmers in Cote d'Ivoire destroy crops

Angry cocoa farmers in Cote d'Ivoire have decided to extend a 10-day strike and destroy some crops, in protest against liberalisation policies and a drop in earnings. The moves have already thrown the country's cocoa industry into disarray.

South African metalworkers respond to clamp-down on demonstration

The National Union Metal Workers (NUMSA) began a dispute against Highveld Steel on Tuesday, after 2,000 union members were disciplined for protesting against the death of a colleague.

The workers were protesting about safety standards after a colleague was killed in an explosion at Highveld Steel's Middelburg plant in Mpumalanga two weeks ago. They delivered a memorandum detailing their complaints. Management tried to prevent the protest going ahead.

Some of those accused of being ringleaders have since been dismissed. Others have been fined or issued with written warnings without being given the opportunity of proper disciplinary hearings.

NUMSA formally declared a dispute last week and said it would be forced to "upgrade" its protests unless management agreed to address their concerns.



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