

# Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

16 December 1999

## **Cypriot civil aviation workers strike to halt privatisation**

On December 8 civil aviation workers struck for four hours in Cyprus. The strike hit 37 inward and outbound flights of Cyprus Airways, Gulf Air and Syrian Airlines. The workers, members of a civil servants union, were protesting government proposals to privatise the island's airports. The strike went ahead despite a government plea that it be suspended.

The union is against the selling off of the Paphos and Larnaca airports, but has made it clear it does not oppose government restructuring of the civil aviation department. A spokesman for the union said, "The airports are among the most profitable in Europe but authorities want to sell them off."

## **Junior doctors in UK set to take industrial action**

Junior doctors in the UK are set to strike in a long-standing dispute with the government over pay, working hours and conditions of employment. Last week, junior doctors who are members of the British Medical Association (BMA) rejected the government's latest contract offer. The BMA is now preparing a ballot of the 30,000 hospital doctors that could lead to strike action in the New Year. The chairman of the BMA's Junior Doctors Committee, Andrew Hobart, said this week, "A ballot of all BMA junior doctor members on industrial action will be requested unless the government improves its current proposals."

Hobart plans to meet with Secretary of State for Health Alan Milburn once a new government offer is made. Hobart and his negotiating committee, which recently defeated a vote of no confidence in their leadership by doctors, had recommended acceptance of the last government offer. Junior doctors are demanding extra pay, particularly for "additional duty hours," as well as limits on overtime, which at present can be 40 hours or more each week.

In response to the junior doctors' protests the government has promised implementation of an agreement cutting weekly hours to a maximum of 56. This is despite a ruling from the European Parliament, which recently voted for UK junior doctors to be quickly included in the European Working Time Directive setting a 48-hour maximum.

## **Hungarian railway workers to strike in pay dispute**

On December 20, Hungarian rail workers are to hold a nine-hour strike to demand a pay increase. The 3 main railway unions have called the strike. The strike will begin at 02:00 GMT.

MAV Rt, the national railway company, and the unions have been in negotiations over next year's contract for the last month. MAV Rt has not increased its original offer of a 5.88 percent rise. The railway unions have called for an increase of 14 percent.

Industrial action by the rail workers would further disrupt international train traffic through Hungary to the east. A rail strike in Romania last week caused delays of up to eight hours.

## **Romanian rail workers strike suspended by Supreme Court**

A national rail strike by Romanian railway workers was suspended on December 10 after the Supreme Court ruled it illegal. The strike had lasted four days and affected industries throughout the country.

On December 8 railway managers met with the union involved in the dispute. Management offered a pay increase of 20 percent. The union has put in a pay claim of 70 percent. A spokesman for the union, Gheorghe Sultana, said that the union's figure was subject to negotiation and stated, "After all, neither our 70 percent nor their 20 is nailed down. Both can be negotiated."

The dispute hit many plants and factories as raw materials and goods were unable to reach their destination. Among these was the Sidex steel mill in the Danube town of Galati. The mill was unable to move 260 rail wagons loaded with finished products, while some 5,000 tonnes of steel remained unprocessed due to the strike.

On December 9 Prime Minister Radu Vasile attended talks between management and the rail union but no agreement was reached. The following day the Supreme Court ordered the strike to be suspended for 45 days to prevent further losses to the economy. The rail workers accepted this order and demanded that its members return to work.

Sultana said, "We have to observe the ruling of the Supreme Court, but we reserve our right to go on strike again if our pay demands are not settled during talks over the coming days. We are open to dialogue." Of the reason given

by the Supreme Court he said, "We can understand that and we don't object. But we are also interested in protecting our interests so the transport ministry should show more understanding for our problems."

### **Nigerian union threatens strike over proposed fuel price rise**

Nigeria's National Labour Congress has called a national strike from January 1, 2000 if government measures lead to a rise in fuel prices. When presenting his government's annual budget three weeks ago President Olusegun Obasanjo referred to government plans to deregulate prices in the petroleum industry, which would raise petrol prices for ordinary Nigerians. The plan has been criticised on the grounds that it would heighten inflation, and raise the cost of living for all.

The president of the Nigerian Labour Congress accused the government of bowing to pressure from international financial institutions, describing it as a budget for the IMF and big business. The current pump price of petrol in oil-producing Nigeria is 20 naira (about 20 US cents) a litre, a price which was fixed two years ago. It is expected that the increase could take the price to about 25 naira, or 25 cents, a litre.

In addition to strikes, there are also to be anti-fuel deregulation rallies in Lagos and Abuja on December 16 and December 21, respectively.

### **Burkina Faso authorities close school ahead of anniversary**

The University of Ouagadougou has been closed till further notice, on the orders of the Ministry of Secondary, Higher Education and Scientific Research. The decision was prompted by the approaching first anniversary of the death of journalist Norbert Zongo. Zongo, who ran the *L'Independant* newspaper until his death in December 1998, was critical of President Blaise Compaore's government. His killing, at Spouy, 100 kilometres from the Burkinabe capital, was widely seen as the response of the government to his criticisms.

Schools in the towns of Koudougou (100 kilometres west of Ouagadougou), Zongo's hometown, and Bobo Dioulasso (385 kilometres west of Ouagadougou) may also be closed for fear of protests.

### **Sierra Leone teachers highlight two-year delay in salary payment**

Barrie Teachers from St. Paul's Secondary School, Pujehun and other schools in the Pujehun District have complained that their salary has not been paid for the past 20 months.

Teacher of French and Social Studies at the St. Paul's Secondary School, Mr. Ponga Vandi, said they are yet to receive any salary for their services for the months of

September 1996 to May 1998. This has caused them a lot of embarrassment, he said, adding that several complaints through the Sierra Leone Teachers' Union to the Ministry of Education, Youths and Sports had brought no result. Mr. Vandi said that whenever they contacted officials at the Ministry of Education regarding their salary arrears, the officials would tell them; "Your names are being computerised."

"As a displaced man, my problems are increasing every day," he cried. "Some of us are now beggars, woodcutters and debtors, which is a disgrace to the profession," he added, pleading that the government pay them now.

### **Lecturers begin strike at Nouakchott University, Mauritania**

The union of science lecturers at Nouakchott University in Mauritania began a strike Saturday to protest against the dismissive attitude of Vice Chancellor Ould Khabbaz, after he refused to receive the lecturers' representatives. The representatives wished to present him with their grievances.

### **Unemployment in Morocco increases to over 15 percent**

Morocco's unemployment rate rose to 15.1 percent during the third quarter of 1999 from 12.9 percent in the second quarter, due mainly to the arrival of new graduates into the job market, official statistics showed.

The state-run Statistics Directorate said in its monthly report, received on Friday, that the number of unemployed rose to 1.53 million at the end September, from 1.32 million at the end of June. It put the total workforce at 10.18 million. Unemployment in urban areas increased to 23.4 percent from 21.3 percent in the second quarter, while in rural areas the rate went up to 6.1 percent from 4.5 percent.

"The increase is mainly due to the arrival of new graduates to the job market," the directorate said. The figures showed that the jobless rate among university and high school graduates was highest in urban areas, rising to 55.2 percent of the workforce from 51.9 percent in the second quarter.

Morocco's population stands at around 29 million, with around half that number living in urban areas.



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