Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East and Africa

7 January 2000

French train drivers strike

On January 1, suburban train drivers in Paris struck in a dispute over working conditions being imposed by management in the transition to a 35-hour week. The workers are employed by the state rail company SNCF. The strike was organised by the CGT union. According to SNCF, between 30 and 50 percent of trains on line B of the RER rail system, which shuttle between the city centre and the suburbs to the south, were affected.

Euro Disney strike ended as unions decide to do storm repairs

Workers at the Euro Disney theme park in Paris ended their five-day strike on December 28 in order to help in the rebuilding of the park that has been damaged by the recent storms.

Of the five unions involved in the dispute, four agreed to end the strike—the CFDT, CFTC, FO and UNSA. The CGT agreed to continue with the dispute. A representative of the FO said, “We are ending all stoppages in the wake of the storm which has devastated the park. All protests are suspended until further notice.”

The strike began following a breakdown in talks over pay and conditions for staff working over the New Year holiday period. The unions estimated that 30 percent of the workforce of 10,000 took part in the strike.

Hungarian rail workers to strike later this month in dispute over pay

Last week Hungarian railway workers agreed to stage a 60-hour strike from January 10 to12. The strike is the latest action in a long-running dispute with management of the state rail system MAV over pay. The rail company has offered staff an average wage increase of 8.5 percent for this year. The workers, organised in three unions, are demanding a more substantial increase.

Telephone workers strike in Israel against deregulation of industry

Workers at the Israeli telephone company Bezeq Israel Telecom went on strike on December 28. The workers are protesting at the opening up of the telecommunications sector to the Israel Railroad Authority.

The organiser of the dispute said that the government had gone back on an agreement specifying that this would not happen. Benny Goldring, the deputy chairman of the Bezeq workers' committee, said, “We were promised, not once and not twice ... that as long as the Electric Company and the Railroad Authority are monopolies they would not receive communications licences.”

Following the strike the company requested that the Tel Aviv Labour Court issue an injunction demanding that the strikers return to work. The workers committee said that it would also consider other forms of protest, including go-slows. The rail company has already invested 200 million shekels ($48 million) to lay 250 kilometres (156 miles) of fibre optic cables. It plans to double that network during the next few years.

Zimbabwean civil servants' wage rise to be paid for by cuts

The Zimbabwean government has announced salary increases between 70 and 90 percent for civil servants. Political analysts have said this was just another electioneering salvo from President Robert Mugabe (an election is due this year), but in fact Mugabe is pandering to the IMF, not to the Zimbabwean people.

At the same time as announcing the pay award, Zimbabwean Labour Minister John Nkomo said the government would slash 20,000 civil service jobs from January as part of a cost-cutting exercise agreed with the IMF. "The process also involves the commercialisation and privatisation of many government functions as well as operating on the basis of cost-recovery in the delivery of some duties," he explained.

The government is attempting to meet IMF targets in order to qualify for the release of remaining tranches of IMF funding. IMF funding was cut last year, after the government was accused of stalling on civil service restructuring and “fiscal extravagance”—which included financing Zimbabwe's troops in the Congo war.

Union leaders of the 155,000 government workers are now likely to call off their threatened strike action. A spokesperson for the Zimbabwe Teachers Association, the largest public service group, described the offer as a “progressive development.” The unions had rejected a previous government offer of 40 percent and were demanding a 150 percent pay rise. Whilst the pay rises have been reported as a major concession, they barely cover growing levels of inflation—above 70 percent in some months last year.

Zambia suspends striking doctors

Zambia has suspended doctors at Lusaka's University Teaching Hospital who went on strike two weeks ago, a spokesman for the doctors said on Monday. The government also banned the doctors from international travel and suspended all leave except sick leave.

The suspension also affects doctors in the copperbelt towns of Kitwe and Ndola, who walked out days after the Lusaka strike action began on December 20. In total, some 200 doctors are on strike in this southern African country, which has a severe shortage of doctors.

The suspension leaves the doctors on half-pay, but their leader, Canicius Banda, said such actions would not sway them. "They should dismiss us if they so wish but that will not help the deplorable health standards," Dr. Banda said. “Even if we go back to the wards, there are no drugs to give patients.”

The doctors launched their latest action to protest against poor and often delayed salaries, non-payment of allowances and poor working conditions in government hospitals with shortages of nursing staff and essential medicines.

The teaching hospital has sent home all non-critical patients. Consultants and doctors on contract were attending only to the most critical cases. Long queues could still be seen at a small hospital office simply marked B.I.D. (Brought in Dead), where people waited for a doctor to issue death certificates so that they could bury their relatives.

The strikers have been banned from leaving the country, a ruling which doctors have condemned as an infringement of their human rights. "This is blackmail. If they can't pay us, well we are entitled to go and look for jobs elsewhere," Dr. Banda said.

Like most other African countries, the health service in Zambia has drastically declined as a result of World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programmes. Public spending cuts mean that patients are now charged fees and have to pay for their own medicines. In 1980 the infant mortality rate was 97 deaths per 1,000 births. It is now 202 per 1,000—i.e., one in five children die before reaching the age of five. Average life expectancy has fallen from 54 in the mid-1980s to 45 today—a figure that will get worse with the growing AIDS epidemic.