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On January 12, French haulage companies agreed to ask haulage drivers to call off their two-day blockade of up to 70 French ports and border crossings. The hauliers had called the action with the support of the unions against government plans to include drivers in the 35-hour working week legislation being introduced in France. Truckers in France presently work a 39-hour week and claimed that further limitations would make it impossible to compete with hauliers from other countries working up to 60 hours a week. The haulage companies claimed to have secured an agreement from the government and issued a statement calling off the action. The drivers were also protesting high fuel prices, which have risen by 32 percent in the last year.

Following six hours of talks with government officials—including the French Transport Minister, Jean-Claude Gayssot—on January 11, the hauliers representatives claimed that they had extracted concessions from the government. Rene Petit, the president of the FNTR hauliers' group, said, "We are calling on the profession to lift the blockade now in place."

At its high point thousands of trucks surrounded ports and border towns, causing thousands of miles of tailbacks. Long queues of traffic were spread across France's borders with Germany, Belgium, Italy, Spain and Switzerland—with the France/Spain and France/Italy borders being particularly affected. On the main highway near Biarritz in southwest France nearly 1,000 trucks blocked the road. By January 12, following the agreement, the number of blockades had been reduced to around 20.

Not all drivers are in favour of the haulage industry being exempt from the law and there have been protests demanding that the working week be cut. But the vast majority of France's 210,000 short-haul drivers have to work up to 60 hours in order to be able to make a living. The government is due to meet trade union officials on January 12 to discuss the terms of the

agreement with the hauliers' organisations. A union-organised demonstration of truck drivers is still set to go ahead on January 31.

Ford workers to ballot for strike action

Seven thousand UK Ford engineering workers and white-collar staff are to be balloted for strike action in a dispute over pay and hours of work.

Representing salaried staff, the Manufacturing, Science and Finance (MFS) union is calling for a pay increase worth 15 percent over three years and a cut in hours. The demands are to give the workers parity with Ford production workers.

The staff are based at all the car manufacturer's plants, including Dagenham in Essex and Halewood on Merseyside, and make up over a quarter of Ford's UK workforce. The ballot is to be held on January 19 with the result to be announced on February 3. Strike action by these workers could have an immediate effect on Ford production world-wide, according to the MFS.

Irish airport workers' strike ends

On January 7, 300 baggage handlers and check-in staff at Dublin and Cork airports began industrial action after rejecting a new contract from the maintenance company, Servisair. The workers, members of the SIPTU trade union, set up pickets at the airport.

On January 11, the staff voted to accept a new contract proposal from the company with a vote of 202 to 31 in favour. The agreement means that the workers will receive a £225 one-off payment and an increase in shift and other allowances.

Hungarian workers strike to demand pay rise

On January 10, rail workers throughout Hungary began a 60-hour strike to demand an increase in pay. The strike halted virtually all rail traffic, with just two trains running throughout the day. All international and freight routes were halted by the dispute.

The workers are employed by the MAV state rail company, who held talks this week with trade union representatives of the 56,000 workers involved in the

dispute in an attempt to prevent the strike.

MAV has refused to offer any more than an 8.5 percent pay increase. This has been rejected by the unions. Initially the unions called for an increase of 14.5 percent, but have now agreed to accept 12 or 13 percent.

MAV Chief Executive Marton Kukely said, "We are promising 8.5 percent and we hope the trade unions will give up some of their rights." MAV has also called for the closure of some of the hundreds of union offices around the country.

Zambian doctors dismissed

Three hundred junior doctors have been dismissed from their posts at the University Teaching Hospital (UTH), Lusaka, Zambia, for going on indefinite strike on last December 20. The doctors were demanding improved conditions of service and more efficient management of the hospitals.

Conditions for doctors at UTH, one of the biggest referral hospitals in the Southern African region, are appalling. Many doctors and their families are forced to live in the interns' block, in one-room apartments, with only four toilets between 30 families. Some have had to endure these conditions for over five years.

Cuban doctors are amongst the staff that the hospital authorities are recruiting to replace the sacked medics. They are already taking steps to evict the doctors and their families from hospital accommodation. Health Minister David Mpamba claimed the doctors had sacked themselves and blamed the strike on "a few bad elements within the junior doctors' ranks who were misleading others".

Plans for the sackings and evictions were made at the beginning of the strike. UTH managing director Elwyn Chomba said the recruitment of new doctors had not come as an "afterthought" following the dismissals, but had been planned since the strike began.

After being served with two warning letters from the Medical Council of Zambia and UTH management, the doctors remained adamant. Some senior doctors are demanding the reinstatement of the sacked workers and are threatening to join the strike if the authorities do not back down. Last Friday, police intercepted a protest demonstration planned by medical students from the University of Zambia's Ridgeway Campus. The police snatched placards from the students and stopped them from marching from the campus to the UTH, 200

metres away.

Health workers strike in Bissau

Hospital workers in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau, began a three-day strike on Monday to demand payment of 13 months of salary arrears and other benefits.

The country's school system has been paralysed for more than a week due to a strike by teachers demanding to be paid between 9 and 11 months of salary arrears and allowances. A meeting is scheduled next week involving the teachers' leaders and officials from the finance and education ministries. The strike comes at the height of campaigning for the second-round presidential election on January 16.

Threat to sack striking agricultural workers in Botswana

Staff members of the Botswana Agricultural Marketing Board downed tools in a countrywide strike on January 4, to press demands for a 25-35 percent salary adjustment, including arrears for the period between July 1998 and March 1999. The management issued an order demanding that the strikers return to work within two days or face the sack.

The strikers have vowed not to return to work until management has addressed their grievances. The union accuses management of failing to adjust salaries in July 1998, when the government did so. Instead, adjustments were only made in April but were not backdated. Workers argue that the board's coffers are bulging with 12 million pula (more than US\$2.5 million), which puts it in a good financial position to pay the arrears.



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