Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

27 January 2000

UK train drivers strike in dispute over working hours

Train drivers at the Connex rail company in south-west England took strike action on January 25 in a dispute with the company over a demand for a 35-hour week and other improvements in working conditions, including 100 percent pensionable pay.

The company is the biggest rail firm in Britain, but during the strike only one in 10 Connex trains was running in the south-east of England. Connex trains usually serve up to 200,000 commuters travelling into London, but the company advised that most people should stay away from work on the strike day as it could only run around 350 trains instead of its usual 3,500. As a result of the strike road traffic in London increased by an estimated 15 percent.

The strike was followed by a ban on train drivers working overtime which caused Connex to cancel more than 500 services a day on its South Central and South Eastern divisions. This is set to rise to more than 600 from Monday when the ban hits its longer distance Kent Coast trains where the ASLEF union has instructed drivers not to work their rest days.

The dispute began before Christmas and drivers have since voted to take a series of one-day strikes. The workers are set to strike for another six days on February 2, 10, 18, 21 and 29.

Connex will lose £1 million in revenue for each day that the dispute continues. The company has stated that it intends to meet with ASLEF over the dispute to prevent further industrial action. ASLEF General secretary Mick Rix said, “We are deeply saddened by the disruption caused to rail travellers, but we remain available for talks.”

Romanian rail workers and teachers strike

On January 25, rail workers in Romania began indefinite industrial action in support of a 56 percent wage increase. The strike went ahead in defiance of an official court ruling deeming it illegal. In December, the Supreme Court ordered the suspension of the strike for 45 days on the basis that it would damage the economy. However, when it became clear that the government would not award any pay increase until this year's budget had been finalised, the workers voted to strike. The action halted train services in two-thirds of the country and delayed many other routes.

The rail dispute took place as a teachers strike entered its second day. The teachers are protesting low pay and are demanding a minimum monthly wage of 1.5 million lei ($81.65) and the payment of further bonuses for 1999. It is estimated that almost 90 percent of schoolteachers participated in the strike.

The two disputes coincide with Prime Minister Mugur Isarescu's imminent talks with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank representatives over economic reform in the country. The talks will focus on the content of this year's state budget.

In a clear signal to the trade unions to co-operate with the government in suppressing such disputes, State Minister Mircea Ciumara said, “The trade unions willing to co-operate with us in drafting the 2000 budget will enjoy certain advantages. I will not talk to those who are on strike.”

Baggage handlers strike in Switzerland

Swiss airport baggage handlers struck on January 24 in a dispute over pay and their transfer to a new company. In total 150 baggage handlers struck at the Zurich airport, resulting in passengers having to carry their own luggage to departure gates. By mid-afternoon 14 flights had been delayed, including a Swissair departure to Chicago that was delayed by more than four hours.

The workers are employed by Swissport, which is a subsidiary of Swissair parent group SAirGroup. The strike was the second at Switzerland's main international airport since October last year.

Teachers and dockworkers strike in Israel

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A national teachers strike in Israel entered its eighth day on January 23. The teachers are demanding a pay increase of 8 percent while the government is refusing to offer more than 2 percent. In total, 85,000 teaching staff are involved in the strike nationally.

The strike has resulted in 1 million elementary and junior high school students missing classes and has closed teacher training colleges and Hebrew language classes. Teachers are now planning to hold a demonstration opposite the prime minister's office in Jerusalem.

The teachers' dispute has run parallel with that of dockworkers, who entered their seventh day of strike action on January 24. The workers are based at the ports of Haifa and Ashdod. On the same day it was reported that about 90 ships are still currently waiting to be unloaded.

Workers strike against suspensions by union

Workers at the Volkswagen auto plant in Uitenhage, South Africa have gone on strike against their union's decision to suspend 13 shop stewards. The union, Numsa, and management are now working together to bring an end to the action.

The strike began last week when a group of workers downed tools and demanded that the union reinstate the 13 suspended shop stewards. This week Volkswagen closed the plant, saying that it would only reopen when the workers agreed to work "normally and in accordance with their contracts of employment". Most of the 300 strikers have been demonstrating with placards at the gate of the plant.

Numsa has endorsed the management threats against the strikers. Its spokesman Dumisa Ntuli said: "We are concerned and fear that the current situation might lead to community conflict. The dispute is now being fought in the taxis and buses and we're afraid it might reach the level of physical intimidation."

Following a company demand that the strikers return to work or face dismissal, Numsa President Mtutuzeli said, "If the company decides to fire employees who continue with the strike today, we will not defend them. We call on our members to return to work and fulfil their contractual obligations."

Numsa suspended the shop stewards in December, alleging they were not accepting the union's authority and had brought the union into "serious disrepute". An earlier attempt to discipline the stewards last July was stopped when workers struck to prevent the union suspending eight of their colleagues. The company responded by getting a court interdict prohibiting any strikes related to the suspension of the shop stewards by the union. This measure is now being used again in order to threaten the workers currently on strike with dismissal.

A Numsa spokesman said Volkswagen had applied for an urgent interdict, which the union would not oppose.

Johannesburg council to cut thousands of jobs

Johannesburg City Council plans to cut more than 40 percent of its workforce as part of its privatisation programme "Igoli 2002". As part of the programme the council announced that it would sell Rand Airport, Metro Gas and the Johannesburg Stadium. Other utilities and services to be sold include water and sanitation, electricity and management contract, waste management, the roads and storm water agency, parks and cemetery agency, the Civic Theatre, Johannesburg zoo, Metro Bus Service and the Fresh Produce Market.

The council estimates that once the privatisation drive has been completed just 15,000 employees will remain. These will serve only the council's “core” functions, such as health and environmental services, arts and cultural services, community services and recreational facilities. The rest will be outsourced to new bodies to be created by the council once the Municipal Systems Bill is made law later in the year.

Niger schoolteachers return to work

Schools in Niger re-opened on January 23 when teachers agreed to end their four-month strike. Both primary and secondary school teachers say they are owed a year's pay, but agreed to return to work after the new government paid them one month's arrears. Some reports have said that university teachers are continuing to hold out for two months back pay.

A civilian government took over from military rulers in December.

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