

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

3 February 2000

Hungarian rail workers begin indefinite strike action

Rail workers in Hungary began indefinite strike action on February 1 in a long-running dispute to demand an increase in pay from the state railway company MAV. The strike began at midnight local time, following a breakdown in talks between management and the three trade unions representing the workers.

In December, the rail workers held a one-day strike and then struck for a further 60 hours in January. During the last strike they warned that further industrial action would take place if their demands were not met.

The unions are calling for a pay increase of 10.78 percent, but the company has refused to offer a raise of more than 8.5 percent. Originally the union had demanded an increase of 14.5 percent.

In total, 56,000 workers are employed by MAV and the strike has had a major impact on passenger trains, freight movement, and postal service trains. However the union has only organised 10 percent of its members in the strike itself. Spokesman Janos Borsik said, "That is more than necessary because it is enough if the engine drivers down tools".

A spokesman for the company said that it expected the action to halt two-thirds of train services during the first day of the strike. Around 800 non-express trains were running to assure a minimum service. The strike continued into February 2 despite the company stating that they would withdraw their offer of 8.5 percent if the workers did not return to work by midday.

French truckers and Paris transport workers strike as new 35-hour week is introduced

French truckers began a national protest and transport staff in Paris took strike action on February 1 to coincide with new legislation introducing a national 35-hour week. Under the legislation, from February 1 companies with more than 20 staff must introduce a 35-hour week for their employees.

The truckers set up a number of blockades in and around 50 locations throughout France and brought a number of main motorways and border crossings to a standstill. Borders with Germany and Belgium are particularly affected by the blockades, as well as access roads to ferry port links with Britain.

The workers are opposed to the vast reduction in pay the introduction of the 35-hour week will mean. Presently, most truck drivers work between 50 and 70 hours a week. The government has stipulated that truckers can work longer than the new 35 hour limit—but only on the basis that they receive the extra payment as overtime.

In opposition to this, the truckers are calling for an increase in

their hourly rate of pay, a 50 percent increase in salary for night work, and a month's bonus salary at the end of the year.

The strike is set to continue for at least a further two days. Roger Poletti, the leader of the transport wing of the French Force Ouvriere (Workers' Force) union said, "It could perhaps go on longer, because once people get out on the tarmac they may not be willing to drive off without winning anything".

In Paris, transport workers are striking to demand a pay increase to coincide with the reduction in the number of hours worked each week. The strike was expected to halt two out of three buses, underground trains and suburban railway trains in the city. Later this week, hospital staff in Paris, together with national unemployment agency workers, plans to strike to demand a pay rise for similar reasons. It has also been reported that ground staff at Air France may strike this week.

Ford engineering staff in UK demanding a pay increase vote to strike

On February 2, it was announced that Ford engineers and other white-collar workers have voted to strike in their campaign to demand a pay rise. The workers voted by a margin of 2-1 for the action. They are demanding an increase of 15 percent to bring their pay to parity with Ford production workers who were awarded a similar rise last year. The production workers' pay rise is to be phased in over a three-year period.

Ford has offered the engineers and white-collar staff an 11 percent increase over three years.

The 3,000 workers involved in the dispute are based at Ford plants across the UK, including the company's design centre at Dunton, Essex. It is expected that a strike by the staff would have a major impact on the company's production facilities at factories such as Dagenham in Essex and Halewood in Merseyside.

Israeli dockworkers union and management reach agreement to end strike

On February 1, the two-week dock workers' strike in Israel ended. The union representing the dockers, the Histadrut Labor Federation, agreed to end the strike in return for a promise that no legal action would be taken against them for costs incurred to manufacturers during the dispute. The strikers were not informed about the agreement and the union did not seek their approval of the deal. The workers returned to work under protest at the way the strike was ended.

The strike was the outcome of a long-running dispute by dockers to oppose the privatisation of the docks and the casualisation of the industry. As part of these plans the government proposed to create

a non-union facility to the north of the port of Ashdod.

Dockers feared that the new port would be used to undermine conditions and lead to the privatisation of the main ports of Haifa and Ashdod. It could result in the national dock company being broken up into competing companies. Dockers at Haifa and Ashdod had been operating a work-to-rule policy for eight months prior to the strike beginning.

The deal agreed between the government and Histadrut stipulated that port workers return to work immediately and that negotiations would continue for a further three weeks. If during that period the talks failed to reach agreement, then the discussions would be elevated to include Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

VW workers in South Africa threatened with dismissal

Workers on strike at Volkswagen's Uitenhage plant have been threatened with dismissal if they do not return to work. The weeklong wildcat strike is in protest against the suspension of 13 shop stewards by the workers' own union, the National Union of Metal Workers (Numsa).

From the outset, Numsa has endorsed management's threats, declaring that if any of the strikers were sacked the union would not defend them.

Late last Friday, an agreement was brokered between Volkswagen management, Numsa and representatives of the strikers. It lays down stringent conditions for the reopening of the plant, which was closed when the strike began. Volkswagen and the union have united to ask workers to commit themselves to fulfilling the conditions of their employment contracts. Police have issued a stern warning that no intimidation of returning workers would be tolerated at the plant.

Numsa spokesman Dumisa Ntuli said that the union hoped the workers would heed the call to return to work on Monday morning. "It is highly regrettable that the strike action has caused the company to lose millions. It is our firm belief that workers as parents have an ultimate responsibility to provide for their families. To that end it is therefore imperative for them to resume work," he said.

Despite the agreement and the company's threats of dismissal, only around half of the labour force reported for duty on Monday. The leaders of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and Numsa then came together to ensure that the strike was brought to an end. The company has now said that workers not returning by February 3 will be dismissed.

The strike was costing the company about R25million (\$4 million) a day, and prevented it from meeting some of its export obligations. Volkswagen said last Wednesday it would redirect part of its vehicle production earmarked for export from South Africa to European plants with excess capacity.

South African minibus drivers protest new regulations

Minibus drivers struck last Thursday against government attempts to regulate their industry. Their protest action halted traffic in Kyalami.

The demonstrators, some of them armed with clubs and spears, caused traffic jams that stretched for miles and stranded thousands of commuters. The drivers were demonstrating against government plans to replace the small vans currently in use with larger minibuses that can seat 18 to 35 people.

The National Taxi Drivers' Organisation, which staged Thursday's demonstration, says 41,000 of its 100,000 members would be fired as a result, because fewer drivers would be needed to transport commuters when the bigger vehicles are brought into service. Karin Pearce, leader of the government's Taxi Recapitalisation Project, rejected this figure. While accepting that up to 20,000 drivers would lose their jobs, she claimed that the project was expected to create more employment, as maintenance needs increased. The four-year phase-out of the small vans is to begin in October, Pearce said.

During the demonstration on Thursday, armed police and soldiers kept the strikers away from an exhibition centre where new minibuses were on display. The striking drivers dispersed a few hours later.

South Africa's taxi-van industry has a reputation for militancy. The vans are the major means of transportation for poor blacks, and during the apartheid era the industry mushroomed into an unregulated system of rival syndicates that waged violent battles for routes.

Demonstrators have asked that a senior government official meet with them to discuss the job losses.

Congo truckers call strike

Truck drivers from northern Congo began an indefinite strike on Tuesday to protest against the treatment they receive at military roadblocks on the N2 road, which links Brazzaville with the north of the country. There are over 50 roadblocks on this major route.

"The security forces mistreat us and ask for lots of money at each roadblock," said strike leader Jerome Loemba. "Not only do we waste hours and hours each day, but we also lose lots of money. The only people who benefit from this are the soldiers". Loemba explained that at every roadblock soldiers are demanding up to 8,000 CFA francs (\$12) per vehicle.

The N2 road is the only route to bring fresh produce to Brazzaville from the north. Other food supply routes are expensive and dangerous. Poor security and the destruction of the railway line during the war mean that aircraft have to be used to bring food to the capital from the port at Pointe Noire.

Since the announcement of the strike action, the price of basic foodstuffs has increased dramatically in Brazzaville's markets. The staple food manioc, which normally sells for 350 CFA francs (\$0.50) per kilogram, has almost doubled and is set to rise further.



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