

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

10 February 2000

## **French medical staff protest government health reforms**

French doctors and nurses demonstrated for the second time in a week in Paris on February 3. The workers were protesting against the deterioration of health care. Changes in the health system were introduced four years ago, ostensibly to channel health spending towards the areas that required it the most. Those on the demonstration said the reforms had instead put staff under intense pressure. Staff at a number of hospitals in the Paris area have struck in the last weeks to demand an increase in funding.

## **Hungarian rail strike is now the longest since World War I**

Railway workers in Hungary have continued their national strike this week. On February 8 the stoppage entered its eighth day and became the longest rail strike since World War I. The strike is the outcome of a long-running dispute and has halted and disrupted many of the international, express and postal train services.

The workers are demanding a pay increase from the state-owned rail company MAV and greater job security. MAV plans to restructure the rail service, close unprofitable lines as well as shed jobs. Some 56,000 workers employed by MAV are involved in the dispute, but 800 trains per day have continued running and minimal service has been provided.

The three unions representing the railway workers are calling for a pay rise of around 10 percent. MAV had offered 8.5 percent. The unions originally demanded a rise of around 15 percent. So far this year the strikes have cost MAV Ft 1 billion (\$3.83 million). Each day of strike activity increases this total by Ft 96 million. In January the workers struck for 60 hours, costing MAV Ft 448 million.

## **Romanian teachers resume national strike**

On February 7, Romanian schoolteachers continued their national strike after suspending it for a week due to school holidays. The teachers are demanding a wage increase and that the government allocate 4 percent of the country's gross domestic product to the education budget. It is estimated that 90 percent of the country's teachers joined the stoppage. The teachers are calling for an increase in monthly pay by 1.5 million lei (\$81). This would represent a doubling of their present pay.

Last month the teachers struck for one month to demand the

pay rise. A government spokesman has stated that it will not hold talks with representatives of the teachers until it has approved its own annual budget. At the end of this month Romanian university teachers also plan to strike for higher pay.

## **Ford UK professional staff may strike to demand pay increase**

Ford UK's 3,000 professional design, engineering and administration workers are to meet with representatives of the Manufacturing Science and Finance union (MSF) on February 10 to decide whether or not to take strike action. On February 2, the staff voted to take industrial action by a majority of 63 percent.

The workers are demanding a pay increase to restore parity with the company's production workers. Ford has offered the staff an 11 percent pay increase over three years, compared with the 15 percent agreed with its production workers. A union spokesman said that Ford also intended to merge the pensions of the two groups of workers. He said, "Our members fear there is going to be a raid on their pension fund."

At the meeting the union is to put Ford's latest 11 percent offer to a vote, before proceeding to the issue of whether strike action will take place. Action by the staff, who are based at Ford plants all over the UK, could lead to the first national strike in the car industry since the 1980s.

## **Israeli teachers end strike**

The Histadrut teachers union ended its two-week strike January 28, returning 100,000 teachers and 1 million students back to the classrooms this week. At the end of their 14-and-a-half-hour marathon session both union and government negotiators declared a victory. Finance Minister Avraham Shohat declared, "We have achieved a good agreement that preserves the teachers' real wages and does not breach wage agreements in the economy."

The agreement was written ambiguously enough to permit the union to say it had achieved a hefty advance—albeit 5 percent and not the 15 it had sought—and the Treasury to deny that the budget framework was exceeded. According to the deal, teachers will be paid monthly bonuses of 5 percent of their salaries in addition to their wages for the next year. Thereafter they will receive a 1.9 percent monthly wage increase.

Retired teacher Yosef Shamah said he got a raw deal. "If you're going to strike, you might as well get something out of

it.”

### **Lebanese teachers prepare to strike**

Twenty-four thousand primary and intermediary private school teachers and their public school counterparts were set to walk out February 8 in their fourth strike this academic year to press the government for pay raises similar to those given to their colleagues in secondary education. Teachers have been waiting for two months for a response from the Education Minister on their proposal to have their pay increased incrementally, but they have been repeatedly told the government cannot afford to raise their salaries.

### **Volkswagen dismisses 1,300 South African workers for wildcat strike**

One thousand three hundred workers have been sacked at the Volkswagen Uitenhage auto plant for taking part in a strike declared illegal by the courts. The dismissals followed two weeks of struggle at the plant during which time the leaders of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) openly sided with management. The workers were sacked on February 3, after an order to return to work and the threat of dismissals. Management was strengthened by an agreement between the company and the union calling for work to resume.

Workers downed tools January 20 in protest against Numsa's decision to suspend 13 shop stewards. The stewards were accused of bringing the union into “serious disrepute”, though no more detailed report of any evidence against them has been produced to back up these claims. VWSA spokesperson Matt Gennrich said production at the plant had been re-organised and the company was in the process of recruitment.

A group called the Workers' International Vanguard League has won support for its opposition to this collaboration with management by the official union. The group has said it will organise protests this week. The league was denounced by Numsa spokesman Dumisa Ntuli, who said, “Their action will have no positive outcome.”. He aligned himself with management, calling the group “opportunists who want to exploit the Volkswagen situation to their advantage ... who are “build[ing] a constituency around the workers who have been dismissed”.

Numsa Eastern Cape chairman Irvin Jim also joined in the witch-hunt and accused the Uitenhage Crisis Committee, which led the strike, of manipulating the employees and blamed it for the sackings. In a bid to regain a shred of credibility, Numsa now claims it is trying to negotiate on behalf of the sacked workers. Numsa President Mtutuzeli Tom confirmed that the union had initiated discussion with VWSA management concerning the dismissals, but refused to comment on the future of the workers.

Tom said of the 150 workers suspended prior to last Thursday's deadline 100 had approached the union for representation at internal disciplinary hearings to start soon. “The company is accusing them of furthering acts of intimidation, damage to company property and assault during

the strike. We will be addressing those who have been dismissed in an attempt to seek a mandate to represent them for reinstatement,” said Tom. He described the Uitenhage Crisis Committee as an obstacle to talking to dismissed workers: “People who sit in that committee are not our members [and] neither [are they] employees of Volkswagen.”

### **Strike at Amplats, South Africa continues**

The strike at Amplats Rustenburg Base Metal Refinery, involving most of the 291 Numsa members at the plant, continued on February 8 despite the National Union of Mine Workers ending its support. The NUM agreed the day before to accept an 8 percent wage increase, backdated to January 1.

The strike began on February 3 over wage increases. Amplats has offered 8 percent, but the workers want 10 percent. NUM representatives and management agreed on a number of strike rules during a meeting held this week, which was attended by a mediator from the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration. The union has promised that picketing will go on without intimidation if management removes security personnel from the premises.

### **University of Zambia general workers threaten to join strike**

On February 3 University of Zambia (UNZA) general workers threatened to join a strike by academic staff, if the delay in paying their January salaries continues. Officials of both the UNZA Allied Workers Union (UNZAAWU) and UNZALARU (Lecturers and Researchers Union) convened a joint meeting February 4 to consider common action. UNZALARU Vice-President Douglas Siakalima said prior to the meeting, “We may put new demands like the resignation of management, because they have failed.”



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