

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

21 December 2000

Protesting nurses paralyse Warsaw

The Polish capital was brought to a standstill on December 18 as protests by nurses blocked key roads throughout the city. The nurses have been demanding a wage rise. Police in riot gear cleared groups of nurses staging impromptu protests across the city. Around 1,000 medical staff took part in the blockades.

Nurses are amongst Poland's lowest paid workers and want an immediate rise of 500 zlotys (\$114) per month. Their current monthly wages range from 500 to 1,500 zlotys.

On December 19, the nurses rejected a government offer that would increase their pay by \$39 a month, saying there was no guarantee it would be approved by parliament. The nursing unions announced that the protests would continue. The government had previously promised a wage increase of four percent above inflation next year. It has stated that there are no funds in this year's budget for any wage increases.

The action is the latest organised by the nursing unions including blocking key roads and border crossings and staging numerous strikes and sit-ins—including a week-long occupation of the main Health Ministry building in Warsaw.

Mirosława Kaliszewska, a nurse from the western town of Bolesławiec picketing the Health Ministry said, "The government says it's unethical for a nurse to go on strike, but why is it not unethical to pay nurses what they are paid in Poland?"

Portugal copper miners strike continues

On December 20, striking Portuguese miners at the Neves Corvo copper mine who have been on strike for six days announced they would call on the Prime Minister to intervene in their dispute over pay and conditions. The miners began the strike on December 14 to demand a wage rise, an end to continuous underground work and the suspension of disciplinary action against their union leader Eduardo Lazaro and 218 workers over protests in November.

Lazaro said that a delegation of strikers would travel to the capital Lisbon from the mine in southern Portugal to meet the Prime Minister. He said that the management at Somincor, the state-controlled company that runs the mine, is refusing to discuss its demands.

Vauxhall workers strike in support of colleagues

Workers at several plants owned by General Motors' British subsidiary Vauxhall held unofficial strike action on December 14 in support of workers who are set to lose their jobs at the company's manufacturing operation in Luton, Bedfordshire.

Staff at the Ellesmere Port factory in Cheshire and the large Vauxhall warehouse in Luton took strike action.

The closure of the Vauxhall plant will lead to the estimated eventual loss of 10,000 because of the effect on firms that supply the plant with goods and services.

UK postal workers strike over closure and cut in hours

On December 18, post office counter staff at 29 post offices in southeast London struck for 24 hours to oppose the closure of one of the offices. The Royal Mail said that it would use managers and "volunteers" in a bid to keep all the offices open during the strike.

In another dispute, hundreds of postal workers in Coventry, West Midlands began a 24-hour strike at midnight on December 18 as part of a campaign to cut their working week to five days. The Royal Mail said managers and volunteers would be delivering mail in Coventry during the strike.

Council workers in London strike against spending cuts and job losses

On December 20, hundreds of council workers employed by Hackney Council in London held a 24-hour strike in protest at spending cuts and job losses. A Council spokesman said that teaching staff, refuse collection and other privately contracted services would not be affected by the dispute.

Mali schoolteachers demonstrate

Several hundred schoolteachers demonstrated in

Bamako, the capital of Mali, demanding a one and a half percent bonus in a letter handed in to the education ministry. Prime Minister Mande Sidibe told parliament that the country could not afford the pay increase and that he feared other public sector workers would also demand more pay. Mali is one of the poorest countries in West Africa with three-quarters of the population illiterate.

South African security men on indefinite strike

Security officers in South Africa have begun an indefinite strike from December 18. They are demanding a 13 percent pay rise-the employers have offered 4 percent-as well as the ending of an hourly pay rate, the establishment of a provident fund and extra pay for night shifts. Hundreds of security officers marched to government departments in Johannesburg to make their demands and then held a rally in the Library Gardens.

Speaking for the unions involved, SA Transport and Allied Workers' Union regional coordinator Siphiso Maduna said: "We marched to the department of safety and security to show our concern about the involvement of police in incidents of assault against our members by employers."

"Two security officers were assaulted in Western Cape and dogs were set on others in Mpumalanga in October when they protested for salary increases. Although we have not reported the incident of dogs being used to control the workers to the Independent Complaints Directorate, we feel the department must do something to discipline its members."

Maduna said that the employers had refused to honour an agreement made in 1998 to negotiate a pay rise and set up the provident fund.



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