

Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

9 August 2001

Coal mine explosion in Romania kill 14 workers

Miners at a coal mine near the small town of Vulcan, 400 km west of Bucharest, Romania refused to go underground on August 7 following an explosion that killed 14 miners and injured two others. The blast deep underground was the worst accident in the local mining industry in the Jiu Valley for 15 years.

The 14 miners were aged between 20 and 43 years. A gas leak 350 metres (1,150 ft) underground caused the explosion. Officials said that 16 coal miners were working at the level where the blast occurred. The coal mine employs around 1,500 workers and dates back to the 19th century.

Miners refused to go underground until they had been informed as to what had caused the explosion. One miner, Aurelian, said “I was terrified when I heard the news and even though I wasn’t due to go underground until midday I came immediately. I hope we will not enter the pits until we know exactly what happened.”

Following the explosion, a government commission led by Interior Minister Ioan Rus, arrived at the mine to begin an investigation. The National coal company CNH announced that the Vulcan pit would be closed for just 24 hours pending the investigation.

The conditions at the coal mines in the area have long been the source of disputes and industrial action. Such intolerable conditions include poor ventilation and the use of obsolete, antiquated equipment. In the past four years more than 70,000 redundancies have halved employment in the industry. In 1999, a plan drawn up by the World Bank called for the closure of 29 pits in the Jiu Valley. This was part of a national plan to shut some 230 loss-making pits over the next three years.

Medical secretaries in Glasgow, Scotland vote to strike

On August 2, Medical secretaries in Glasgow voted by a large majority to strike in a dispute over pay. Some 300 secretaries are involved in the dispute and are set to strike for three days beginning on August 8.

The industrial action was called by the public sector workers union UNISON after 91.3 percent of workers voted in favour of industrial action.

The dispute has been ongoing for some 14 months between the staff and the North Glasgow NHS Trust. The secretaries are calling for pay parity with management secretaries, who earn approximately £2,000 a year more than them. The strike follows the breakdown in protracted talks between the union and the North Glasgow NHS Trust.

Auto Workers strike in South Africa

About 21,000 workers in the auto manufacturing industry in South Africa began an indefinite strike over their annual wage claim, disrupting production at most leading motor manufacturing plants. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) led its members out on strike at DaimlerChrysler SA’s plant in East London, the Delta Motor plant in Port Elizabeth, Toyota SA’s plant in Durban, BMW SA’s plant in Rosslyn, Volkswagen SA in Uitenhage and Nissan SA in Rosslyn. Workers at the Ford Motor Company of SA’s plant in Pretoria were locked out.

The strike follows a deadlock between the Automobile Manufacturers Employers’ Organisation (Ameo) and Numsa over wage increases. Numsa has demanded a 12 percent across the board wage rise, while Ameo offered just 7.5 percent. Ameo later accepted a proposal by a mediator of an eight percent across the board increase, as part of a three year package that included a minimum wage of R3,365 (\$406) a month, but this was rejected by Numsa.

Numsa spokesperson Dumisa Ntuli described the first day of the strike as “a resounding success,” saying it had received 100 percent support from workers. The automobile industry is one of South Africa’s most important exporting sectors, with the major companies using the cheap skilled labour as a key part of their global production platforms. An Ameo spokesperson said the strike would have “serious consequences for

the local economy and further negatively influence foreign perceptions about labour stability in South Africa”.

The auto strike is part of the annual pay round negotiations in South Africa. Workers in the electrical power industry returned to work at the end of last month after three days on strike, following an improved pay offer in which the lowest-paid workers will receive a 10 percent wage increase while the highest paid will receive a 7.5 percent increase. Eskom, the power utility, had offered wage increases in the range 7 to 9 percent whereas the unions had demanded 9 to 11 percent.

Strikes were narrowly averted in the gold and coal mining industries, as well as the steel sector, as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and Numsa agreed to wage deals and called off proposed action. The NUM’s 200,000 members had voted overwhelmingly in favour of a strike.

A strike of 5,000 Numsa members at Highveld Steel is going ahead, as management have offered a pay rise of only 6.8 percent. The union is demanding a 15 percent pay rise with housing, medical and other benefits. Ntuli said that: “Our demands have been very reasonable, but Highveld Steel is refusing to offer even half what we’re asking and has refused to even try address the wage disparity between black and white workers.”

Junior doctors strike in Sierra Leone

Junior doctors employed by the state began an indefinite strike last week in Sierra Leone to press demands for better pay and working conditions at hospitals. “Our action is not only for doctors, but for nurses and porters and other hospital staff,” Sahr Kortegui, the secretary-general of the Sierra Leone Association of Medical Officers, was reported as saying in Freetown.

The doctors, who had given the government 11 days’ strike notice, said porters cleaned vomit and blood with their bare hands and nurses were exposed to dangerous infectious diseases because they were not provided with gloves and antiseptic. Kortegui said nurses worked 12 hours daily without medical facilities or payments for overtime. A children’s hospital in eastern Freetown is equipped with “very few and old fashioned beds with bare sponge mattresses.” There are no gloves, needles, cotton wool, or surgical spirit, according to Kortegui.

Mozambique transport workers strike

Hundreds of port and railway workers took strike action to demand pay increases in Maputo and southern Mozambique. Talks between the state port and railway company CFM and worker’s representatives had broken down, with the workers’ demands including a minimum monthly wage equivalent to \$100. The strike has been declared illegal. CFM employs more than 10,000 people throughout Mozambique. but is cutting its workforce to about 5,000 as part of a World Bank and International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programme.



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