

# Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

6 December 2001

## **Romanian workers demonstrate to demand government resignation, higher wages and job security**

On November 29, around 15,000 workers held a national demonstration in Bucharest to demand higher wages and greater job security.

The National Block Union that represents some 750,000 workers called the demonstration. It was part of a number of protests in the capital over the last week to demand better living conditions and the resignation of Prime Minister Adrian Nastase's government.

The demonstrators, who came from many industrial sectors, including defence, auto and postal workers, shouted slogans such as "We've had enough! Down with the Prime Minister!"

With the onset of winter many workers fear that they will not be able to pay their extra utility bills and that their jobs could be lost. The government this year increased utility prices, and the price of fresh produce is also set to rise. In addition there is speculation that the government could cut jobs in state-run industries in order to reduce public spending costs.

There is large-scale generalised poverty in Romania where the average monthly wage is the equivalent of \$100. Unemployment is currently running at about eight percent. A postal worker from Bucharest interviewed on the demonstration stated, "We want higher wages, lower taxes and a risk bonus." She worked in Bucharest and earned the equivalent of \$60 a month. A defence worker also cited the case of his factory which had faced a large drop in orders meaning he was now on part-time work and had a large cut in earnings.

## **Air traffic controllers in France to strike**

Air traffic controllers workers in France were due to begin industrial action on December 5 as part of a campaign to oppose the introduction of the European Union's "single sky" legislation. The strike is expected to disrupt and delay flights for 36 hours.

The EU plan would eliminate nationally run air traffic control and planes would be able to fly routes not limited by Europe's borders and national legislation on air traffic control. French air traffic controllers unions' say that the legislation will ultimately lead to the privatisation of civil

aviation.

## **Airport staff in Manchester, England to ballot for industrial action**

Workers at Manchester Airport are to ballot for industrial action to protest the loss of 90 jobs. From December 6, more than 1,800 workers at the airport will be sent ballot papers. Many of the workers are members of the Transport and General Workers' Union and include firemen, security guards, airfield marshals, engineers and clerical staff.

The result of the strike ballot is due on December 21. A vote in favour could mean the first strike action taking place on December 28, disrupting flights over the holiday period.

Airport management has cited the general downturn in the airport industry since the September 11 terrorist attacks as the main reason for the cutbacks and has predicted a two million reduction in passenger numbers during the upcoming year. Despite these cuts there have recently been large pay rises for the directors at the airport including chief executive Geoff Muirhead.

## **Civil servants in Britain vote to strike in dispute over safety**

Thousands of civil servants in Britain employed at social security offices and "Job Centres" have voted to strike in an ongoing dispute over their safety at work. On December 4, the Public and Commercial Services Union announced that its members supported industrial action by a margin of 16,770 to 14,659, a majority of 53 percent, on a 50 percent turnout in a ballot held by the union.

The dispute centres on government proposals to remove security screens from job centres. The security screens act as a barrier as the staff at the offices can face verbal and occasionally violent physical abuse from those mainly unemployed workers who use the facilities.

The PCSU is expected to name the first dates of the industrial action shortly and it will involve five days of strike action per month. A PCSU spokesman said of the strike vote, "A majority of members have voted for the most protracted strike action ever put to them, despite an unprecedented management propaganda offensive". He added that the union did not want to have to resort to strike action prior to Christmas and that "... if the management would agree to meet us there is a chance the action can be

averted”.

### **South Africa: twin babies die in factory**

Two babies born inside a clothing factory in Newcastle, South Africa have died, after it was locked shut for the night by the owner. The twins were born during Friday night last week, after the mother, Nokuthula Hlatswayo from Madadeni, and 15 other employees were locked in for the night shift. It was impossible for the mother and babies to receive the assistance they needed.

The Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (Sactwu) has called for the factory owner to be arrested and charged with culpable homicide. So far, however, the company has simply been found to have breached the Occupational Health and Safety Act. The chief occupational health and safety inspector, Faiza Salie, said on Friday the factory will not be allowed to restart its operations until it provides proper emergency exits. Workers at the clothing factory said that attempts to reach the owner were unsuccessful because his cellphone was switched off.

The number of sweatshop factories in Newcastle has grown rapidly in recent years. Workers’ rights are regularly violated, health and safety laws are broken without redress and trade unions are refused recognition. The mother was reported to be earning 190 Rand a week, which is less than the minimum wage for the clothing industry.

### **National strike at South African ports undermined by unions**

A national strike by South African port workers, which crippled the country’s major ports for two days, has been undermined by the unions involved, with some of the workers being told to return to work just as others are coming out on strike. The SA Transport and Allied Workers’ Union (Satawu)—which represents about 45 percent of the port workforce—settled with the SA Port Operations and the National Port Authority on Friday last week, after agreeing to the management figure for the payment of performance bonuses. The three parties compromised on the issue of the performance-related bonus. The union had already reduced its demand from 3,000 Rand to 1,500 Rand, but eventually settled for the 1,000 Rand offered by management. “This represents a significant sacrifice on the part of workers,” said Satawu’s national secretary of the maritime sector, Veronica Mesatywa. The union agreed to instruct its members to return to work as soon as possible, and shifts resumed on Friday evening.

Meanwhile, the SA Logistics, Services, Transport and Allied Workers’ Union and the United Transport and Allied Trade Union (Utatu) announced that their members would come out on strike from Monday this week, to demand more generous performance bonuses than those accepted by Satawu. Wyndham Evans, Utatu’s representative for the

maritime sector, said “They are far off with their offer and we will continue with our action until they treat us the same way they treat middle management.” The union had 2000 members in the ports. SA Logistics, Services, Transport and Allied Workers’ Union vice president Alex Steyn said the union was demanding 3,000 Rand across the board. The union also has 2,000 members working at the ports, the majority in Durban.

Durban, as the country’s largest port, has been hit hardest by the strikes. Sixteen ships were queuing at the container terminal, at the beginning of the week. Satawu general-secretary Veronica Mesatywa said the union would now encourage workers to help Portnet deal with the backlog. This was in response to a call by SA Port Operations executive manager for human resources, Stephen Matlou, for the union to encourage its members to work 12-hour shifts until the backlog is cleared.

Other ports affected by the strike include Saldanha Bay, Cape Town, Mossel Bay, Port Elizabeth and East London.

### **Nigerian oil workers strike over share deal**

Oil workers employed by Agip Nigeria went on strike last week, after a 60 percent interest in the company changed hands without anyone giving them any explanation. The 60 percent stake in the company had been owned by Italy’s ENI, but it was sold to the Nigerian company Ocean and Oil Limited for over 75 million naira (1 naira = 0.08 dollars).

The workers have already brought the company’s petroleum marketing operations to a halt.

Ayoade Akanmu, chairman of the senior staff association, said that no work would take place in any of Agip’s fuel depots and fuel stations across the nation. This is likely to cause a scarcity of petroleum products in the country.

Last week the strikers disconnected the electricity and water supplies to the company’s premises, causing the temporary closure of its headquarters.



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