

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

13 December 2002

## **24-hour general strike in Portugal**

On December 10, hundreds of thousands of workers took general strike action for 24 hours in Portugal. The strike involved workers from throughout the public and private sector including rail employees, hospital staff, school teachers, refuse collectors, and civil servants.

The action was part of a campaign against government proposals to change labour laws making it easier to dismiss employees, introduce greater flexibility into working hours and short-term contracts. The measures follow the government's recent cuts in public spending and a spate of redundancies as it has sought to slash budget deficits for 2001 in excess of European Union limits.

The general strike resulted in the near total shutdown of the rail network and lengthy traffic jams. A number of scheduled air flights of the national airline TAP were also halted, with the company flying domestic services only. In the capital city of Lisbon, all rail services were cancelled and many buses did not run.

The stoppage was the second major general strike to be held recently to protest the changes. In November, a general strike in Portugal, the first general stoppage in 10 years, was held.

Workers at Portugal's largest factory, the Volkswagen subsidiary Autoeuropa at Palmela, south of Lisbon, participated in the strike. A trade union spokesman announced that 88 percent of the workers had struck. Workers employed at private textile and footwear factories also took part.

## **Public sector staff strike in Greece**

Public sector workers in Greece took strike action for 24 hours on December 5 in a dispute over pay. The strike involved more than 400,000 teachers, civil servants and health workers who are demanding above inflation pay awards. Some 2,500 airport workers staged a three hour strike in sympathy with the public sector employees, causing more than half of all scheduled flight into Athens and other airports around

the country to be cancelled.

## **UK gas engineers vote to strike over pay**

Gas engineers in the UK are set to take strike action over the Christmas period, following a ballot held by the GMB trade union.

The workers are employed by Transco Company. The vote follows the failure of talks held at the conciliation service ACAS. The staff maintain the UK's gas pipe network, supplying gas to millions of homes and businesses.

Transco is offering a three percent pay rise and the GMB is seeking an increase of around five percent. The company's offer is dependent on changes to hours, premium payments, allowances and sick pay. The ballot announced this week gives the go-ahead for strike action to be held at anytime from December 12.

## **Britain's firefighters union suspends another eight-day strike**

The Fire Brigades Union executive announced December 11 the suspension of the nationwide eight-day strike due to start December 16.

It is the second time that the FBU Executive has suspended strike action, pending the conclusion of talks with the conciliation service ACAS. Firefighters balloted overwhelmingly to take the action in pursuit of a 40 percent pay increase, to raise their salaries to £30,000 per annum. The FBU came under attack from government, the media and the Trades Union Congress for "politicising" the strike, when union leader Andy Gilchrist criticised Labour's policies. It has retreated ever since.

The suspension means that none of the strikes scheduled for the run up to the New Year will now take place, despite the government's insistence that it will not fund any increase in wages and demands for some 10,000 job cuts in the service.

## **Metrobus drivers go on strike in South Africa**

Johannesburg: Metrobus drivers carried out an unofficial walkout and strike on the afternoon of

December 9, bringing most services in and around the city to a halt, as well as services to Roodepoort and Randburg. The drivers stopped work after a change to the way their rosters are drawn up. Previously, workers had been able to arrange their own, but management are now trying to enforce its own rosters. The drivers are represented by the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) and the Independent Municipal Allied Trades Union (IMATU).

The Johannesburg Metro council gave the strikers an ultimatum to return to work on December 10 or face disciplinary action. However, about 30 Metro bus drivers vowed to continue their strike action.

### **Air Zimbabwe attempts to break engineers strike**

Air Zimbabwe has hired 15 engineers from South Africa and is reportedly paying them \$US55 (\$Z3,025) an hour, according to Gabriel Ziki, the chairman of the Zimbabwe Aircraft Maintenance Engineers Association (ZAMEA). The South African engineers are servicing two aircraft grounded by a strike, as well as assisting Air Zimbabwe's newly-recruited engineers who were engaged after the dismissal of the striking engineers.

Most ZAMEA members have recently been fired by the airline. Air Zimbabwe dismissed 89 out of the 139 striking engineers and the remainder have their case pending at the Ministry of Labour. They have been sending their planes to South Africa for maintenance.

Ziki said that the national airline had not paid the striking engineers their salaries for the past three months. The striking engineers were served with suspension letters on September 13, two days after the strike began. Ziki said the local engineers' salaries ranged from \$Z61,000 to \$Z97,000 a month and they are demanding a monthly salary of between \$Z200,000 and \$Z400,000 (\$Z1,000 = \$18).



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