

# Workers Struggles: Europe and Africa

24 January 2003

## **Doctors in Croatia continue strike**

Doctors in Croatia are continuing their strike that began on January 14 in protest over low pay and growing workloads. They have said they will only treat urgent cases, and all regularly scheduled operations and treatments are to be postponed until their demands are met.

The doctors hope that the government will approve a 28 percent pay rise this week. Their union has said that failure to do so will cause them to up their demand to 45 percent and extend the strike. So far approximately 90 percent of the country's doctors are on strike. Doctors in outpatient clinics are not involved in the dispute.

Health Minister Andro Vlahusic has instructed hospitals to work normally and has accused the doctors of acting illegally by endangering patients' health. President Stjepan Mesic said, "The government has only so much money to give. If they demand more money, someone should say where the extra funds could be found, or from whom they could be taken away." In December the government reached an accord with the International Monetary Fund to cut public spending and reduce the budget deficit.

## **Protesters oppose labour law changes in Slovakia**

On January 20, some 150 demonstrators occupied the Labour Ministry in Bratislava, Slovakia to protest a proposed government reform of employment laws that will increase maximum overtime hours, permit part-time contracts, and make it easier for employers to hire and fire workers.

Despite ministers meeting with the protesters, the government has made clear that it will press ahead with the legislative changes, which it says are aimed at making Slovakia more attractive for businesses investment.

## **French metal workers occupy plant to prevent closure**

On January 20, the factory committee at Metaleurop Nord at Noyelles-Godault, in the Pas-de-Calais region of France decided to temporarily confiscate the plant in protest at its impending closure. The committee has demand details of the exact stock and account credit of the plant, which produces lead and zinc, following the closure announcement on January 17. The plant is in a region where 25 percent of the population is unemployed.

On January, 21 management announced that ongoing

metal production was to end within five days and the plant closed.

## **Education surveillants in France hold 24 hour day of action**

On January 17, surveillants in France held a strike for 24 hours in protest at government plans to remove 5,600 of them from their employment in schools. Surveillants are in the main young people who assist teachers in schools and look after pupils.

Surveillants demonstrated in several cities, including Paris, Nantes, Toulouse, Marseille and Orléans. The strike and demonstrations were called by a number of unions as part of a week of action in schools nationwide.

Some 60 percent of surveillants and 40 percent of education assistants participated in the strike. In some areas the participation level was 80-90 percent. This was equal to the number who participated in the last strike on December 17.

## **UK firefighters stage third national strike**

Britain's 50,000 plus firefighters staged their third national strike on Monday January 20. The 24-hour strike is to be followed by two 48-hour strikes on January 28 and February 1.

The firefighters are demanding a 40 percent wage increase to bring their salaries to £30,000 per annum. The local authorities who employ the firefighters have rejected the demand on government insistence. The authorities have offered an 11 percent pay increase over two years but have insisted this must be tied in with jobs cuts and the closure of fire stations.

Conservative politicians and the media have denounced the strikers as traitors and have demanded the government outlaw the dispute and use police to break picket lines. Some 19,000 troops are being used to provide cover during the strike, just as the British government has announced a major mobilisation of the army to prepare for war against Iraq.

In response, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) is to re-enter talks with the employers this week. FBU leader Andy Gilchrist has said negotiations could lead to the two further strikes being suspended.

## **Workers at Peugeot in the UK to strike**

Auto workers at Peugeot in the UK have voted to strike in

a dispute over pay. The workers are members of the Transport and General Workers Union and voted in a ballot for industrial action by a margin of 54.2 percent. The employees have rejected a two-year offer that Peugeot say is worth 7.3 percent. The TGWU has rejected this claim and said that it is worth only between 3 percent and 3.5 percent in the first year and less than that in year two.

On January 20, members of the Amicus trade union based at the firm's Ryton plant in Coventry also voted for industrial action by a majority of 340 to 310.

In response Peugeot issued a veiled threat that a strike could lead to workers losing their jobs. A statement said, "Decisions taken by the trades unions in the next few days will have a long term effect on the future. A decision to strike will damage the hard earned, justifiable reputation for efficiency and quality that has been gained over recent years. It would also have serious consequences for our customers, both in the UK and overseas, our employees, in terms of lost earnings and, potentially, future investment and employment prospects."

### **Freight train drivers in UK demand pay increase and 35 hour week**

Freight train drivers employed at the UK's largest freight firm are to stage four 24-hour strikes in a dispute over pay and hours. The workers are members of the Aslef train drivers union and are employed at England Wales and Scottish (EWS) railways. The employees are set to strike for consecutive Saturdays starting at 3pm on February 1. In a strike ballot 75 percent of EWS drivers supported a call for industrial action in pursuit of a pay rise and a 35-hour week.

### **Nigerian dock workers in conflict with Chevron**

A team of soldiers and mobile police attacked dock workers at the Chevron jetty, at Escravos, Warri, resulting in many of the workers jumping into the water. At least two are feared drowned and three men were arrested.

The workers are members of the Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria (MWUN), which reported that the two missing men have not been seen since the clashes took place. The union statement explained that the dock workers had gone to the jetty to insist on the legal right of union members to work all areas of the port, whether private or government owned.

During negotiations between unions and management that have lasted more than nine months, Chevron has insisted that the jetty is private property and that unionised workers can be excluded from it. The union statement said: "We had gone to Escravos to take up stevedoring operations at the jetty, but to our surprise, Chevron's security co-ordinator quickly mobilised mobile policemen and soldiers to harass, intimidate and torture our men."

The union's legal representative has called on the Nigerian

government to put pressure on Chevron to produce the missing men. Local police deny detaining anyone in relation to the incident and the Nigerian newspaper reporting the case, *This Day*, has received no comment from Chevron.

### **Textile Workers demonstrate in Kaduna, northern Nigeria**

About 1,500 workers at Kaduna Textiles Limited (KTL) held a demonstration in front of the factory over non-payment of wages since April 2002. They protested months of hardship, including the deaths of 43 colleagues who died as a result of stress caused by having no pay, and demanded the sacking of KTL's managing director. KTL is jointly owned by the 19 northern states of Nigeria.

### **Diamond miners strike in Ghana**

About 250 miners are on strike at Ghana Consolidated Diamonds (GCD) in Akwatia, in the Eastern region of the country. GCD is Ghana's main diamond producer and the strike is said to be stopping an average daily output of 500 carats of diamonds worth US\$12,500.

The dispute apparently dates back to April 2001 when the miners called for the removal of Sylvester Kwame Ankra, the engineering manager of the company. Ankra and the managing director at that time were accused by the men of corruption involving the purchase of a vehicle for \$6,000 and the placing of an advert in the international press for \$45,000. Although the government organised an inquiry into the issue, its findings have not been made public and Ankra was given his job back. The workers are citing the Ghanaian government's call for zero tolerance for corruption to back up their demand.



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