

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

14 February 2003

## **Teachers in Russia protest non-payment of wages**

More than 17,000 teachers at more than 800 schools and kindergartens in the Volga region of Kirov, Russia held a five-day strike last week. The teachers are protesting at the non-payment of millions of dollars of wages, since November and December 2002 in some cases.

Wage arrears in the city of Kirov alone totalled some 180 million rubles (\$5.65 million) as of February 1. The strike is the first such dispute in Kirov since 1998, when a 30-day strike occurred over the same issue.

Lyudmila Kovalenko, the chairman of Kirov's teachers union, said teachers decided to strike after they were not paid over the New Year's holidays. She added, "Our teachers could not afford to buy candy for their own children for New Year's day."

Teachers in the Irkutsk region of Siberia stepped up the strike action this week. By February 11 some 456 teachers from eight secondary schools and three kindergartens had joined the strike that began in the town of Tayshet the day before. The strike originally involved 90 teachers from two secondary schools in Nizhneilimskiy District. The workers have been promised the wages that have been overdue since December.

This week the chairman of the regional trade union of education workers met for talks with Tayshet mayor Nikolay Shrayner. The union said that teachers would return to work the next week if wages are paid. The average monthly salary for a teacher in Kirov is just 1,500 rubles (\$47).

## **Air Lib workers in France demonstrate against collapse of airline**

Since February 6, all activities of Air Lib ceased, leading to a number of protest actions on the same day. The Air Lib employees face losing their jobs after the French government announced that the indebted airline was bankrupt. On February 9, takeover negotiations with the Dutch group IMCA failed.

On February 10, employees of Air Lib in Toulouse and the town of Perpignan began a two-hour blockade at the entrances of the airports. Shortly after this a further

hundred employees at Nice and Toulon airports organised a demonstration march between the two dispatch offices of the airport Nice-Cote-d'Azur. The CFDT, CGT and others trade unions organised the action.

Near the airport Orly not far from Paris, 1,500 employees held a meeting at the headquarters of the company. They then moved to the dispatch offices and chanted, "Give us back our work!"

Some 50 members of CFDT-Air France and a dozen of local political representatives of Essonne and Val-de-Marne (regions) accompanied them. At Orly West there was a violent clash with a CRS riot police unit that used tear gas to deny the protesters' access to the check-in desks of Air France and to the runways.

In the early afternoon, the demonstrators blocked the Nationale 7 (the most important street leading to the airport) at both entrances and the A 106 for nearly two hours.

In the evening a demonstration organised by the unions was held at the Place de la Bastille. The unions called for a demonstration on February 11 in front of the Ministry of Transport.

On February 11 CRS riot police attempted to drive back several hundred Air Lib employees demonstrating at the transport ministry. The protest led to a large traffic jam on the Boulevard Saint Germain.

Demonstrators chanted "We want to work!" and other slogans.

A delegation of local officials near Orly and the CGT and CFDT unions was informed by the ministry in the early afternoon that the government prefers an anticipated liquidation (bankruptcy proceedings) and not efforts to keep Air Lib afloat. In the afternoon some 500 demonstrators moved through Paris, ending up at the headquarters of the ADP (Aéroports de Paris) at the Denfert-Rochereau Place. The protesters were closely monitored by the CRS and mobile gendarmes (a section of the police).

## **Aluminium workers in France demonstrate against job losses**

On February 8, workers at Péchiney plants at Tarascon-sur-Ariège in France demonstrated against closure and restructuring plans. The plants produce alloy aluminium and the proposals of the company would affect production in the towns of Auzat and Tarascon-sur-Ariège.

About 5,000 to 6,000 Péchiney workers from towns such as Mercus-Garrabet, Marignac, Pierrefitte-Nestalas and Lannemezan, as well as supply workers to the plants and local people joined the demonstration. The demonstration was organised by the CGT trade union.

At the end of January management announced the shut down of the Auzat plant with the loss of 218 workers and threatening a further 50 at Tarascon-sur-Ariège.

### **Nurses in Dublin strike in dispute over pay**

Nurses in Dublin, Ireland continued their industrial action this week, with a six-hour strike held on February 11. The nurses are members of the Irish Nurses' Organisation and are demanding an increase for on-call payments. The dispute goes back to March 2002.

### **Zimbabwean miners strike at Rio Tinto**

Thousands of Zimbabwean mineworkers from mines owned by Rio Tinto have gone on strike to demand a 150 percent salary increment. The mining company is reported to have said it will review workers' salaries only when the government has devalued the Zimbabwean dollar. The economy has all but collapsed and the government is running out of foreign currency for exchange.

The president of the Miners' Association of Zimbabwe, Tinago Ruzive, said, "Workers are agitated as they had been promised in November that their salaries would be reviewed by 150 percent as from the beginning of January this year."

He said that mine workers on the lowest grades were presently earning \$18,000 Zimbabwean a month. Officially the Zimbabwean dollar is pegged at Z\$55 against the US dollar and the mining companies are proposing a devaluation of up to Z\$800 to bring the currency in line with its unofficial market value. Rio Tinto owns some of the country's largest mines.

### **Zambian health workers strike**

Health sector workers in Ndola Central, Kitwe Central and Arthur Davison hospitals in the Copperbelt region of Zambia, as well as workers in 18 clinics in the area, have taken strike action. Nurses and other workers at the hospitals are demanding a 300 percent pay rise, as well as housing and travel allowances. They are also claiming leave benefits that have not been paid for the last seven years.

Civil Servants and Allied Workers Union of Zambia

(CSAWUZ) President Leonard Hikaumba, who is also Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) president, pleaded with the strikers to return to work, promising, "But if Government does not come back to us after one week, then the negotiations will end."

Hikaumba, whose pleas were rejected, said the government last week had offered a 19 percent salary rise for civil servants whereas the union negotiating team were asking for a 100 percent hike. CSAWUZ Copperbelt secretary Dave Chiyobe said that the workers were demanding to speak to Zambian Health Minister Brian Chituwo.

The Zambian government have declared the strike illegal and riot police were called in to disperse workers who were meeting at the hospitals. Management and third year nursing students are manning the hospital wards, dealing only with critical cases.

### **Health and education disputes in Nigeria**

Hospital workers at the Federal Medical Centre, Jalingo, Taraba State have taken strike action over the non-payment of a 22 percent pay rise. Hospital gates have been locked and patients sent home since February 3. According to P.M. News, the acting medical director of the hospital, Dr. Ekerete Daniel Ekanem, agreed that the federal government approved the 22 percent increase in May 2001 but the funds had not been made available.

The national strike of university lecturers in Nigeria that began at the beginning of this year still continues. Chairman of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), University of Benin branch, Dr. Austin Moye accused the Federal Government of refusing to talk to officials from the union. Management had asked the union to present minimum requirements for the resolution of the dispute. Dr Moye reported, "ASUU fully complied within 24 hours. Fourteen days after, there has been no response from the government. Instead, they have through the Ministry of Education, summoned the vice-chancellors of federal and state universities to a meeting in Abuja on February 6, ostensibly to direct the various vice-chancellors to break the strike by force rather than dialogue."



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