

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

21 March 2003

## More than 150,000 workers in Germany involved in stoppage in protest at war

Tens of thousands of German workers stopped work for 10 minutes on Friday March 14 to protest the impending US-led war against Iraq, bringing car assembly lines to a halt, and in some cases, city trams to a standstill.

Union organisers said more than 150,000 workers at factories across the country—among them three Volkswagen factories and a Daimler Chrysler plant in Duesseldorf—walked off their jobs briefly as part of a Europe-wide demonstration for peace. Protests also took place in many eastern cities such as Halle.

Recent opinion polls have showed an overwhelming majority of Germans oppose military action against Iraq and protests are expected to escalate now war has started.

## Romanian workers protest mass redundancy plans

Nearly 18,000 Romanian workers protested against mass redundancies in Central Square in the city of Brasov on March 17. The workers, who are employed at the Roman, Tractorul and Rulmentul factories in the city, were joined by Ambulance Service staff and others.

The government deployed riot police troops in Central Square for the duration of the protest. Unions calling the demonstration demanded the resignation of the Health Minister Daniela Bartos and Privatisation Minister Octav Cozmanca.

The workers were protesting plans for three state-owned firms—currently controlled by the privatisation authority APAPS—to make 20,000 employees redundant in three months time. APAPS then intends to sell the companies privately.

At the Roman truck maker and Tractorul tractor manufacturing plants more than 3,000 employees at each location are set to lose their jobs. At the Siderurgica Hunedoara steel plant 3,500 are to be made redundant.

## UK firefighters union calls off strike action

The executive of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) agreed March 19 to call off a nation wide 24-hour strike scheduled the following day.

Firefighters have been involved in a long running dispute for a 40 percent pay increase to raise annual earnings to £30,000. Local Authority employers, backed by the government, have rejected the pay claim insisting that any wage increase must be paid for by job cuts and changes to working practices.

On Wednesday, however, the FBU executive accepted the local authorities offer of a 16 percent increase over three years, with strings attached, despite having rejected it on previous occasions. Their decision coincided with parliament voting to support British military action against Iraq.

Throughout the firefighters dispute the government has kept 19,000 members of the armed forces in reserve to provide emergency cover. The executive argued that military hostilities meant firefighters would have to drop their pay claim and accept a deal that the union had previously denounced for worsening its members' conditions.

Almost immediately, however, the executives' recommendation was

rejected overwhelmingly by 250 FBU delegates gathered at a recalled national conference. The delegates called on firefighters “in the strongest terms possible” to reject the proposed deal, which is now to be put before members over the next two weeks.

In response, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott announced that he intended to impose the settlement on the firefighters and would introduce legislation enabling the government to direct the operations of the fire service.

## France rail workers strike against privatisation

French rail workers have been taking strike action against privatisation. On March 14, workers employed by the state rail network SNCF held strike action and protests, mainly near border stations. The strike action preceded the introduction the following day of the “liberalisation” of the French rail freight network, i.e., the opening of national routes for competition. Some 50,000 kilometres of railways are to be prepared for use by private freight firms.

In a statement denouncing the “economic and social consequences” of liberalisation, rail unions called a 48-hour national strike beginning March 17, which won widespread support and halted some 75 percent of trains. In Ile-de-France, the region around Paris, all trains were stopped, causing severe traffic jam problems. On the Paris-Brussels line, only one high-speed train was running per hour while all overnight trains from Paris to Barcelona and Madrid were cancelled.

A separate stoppage was held by SNCF staff in northern France on March 17 with 50 percent of traffic being affected. The strike was held in protest at attacks by members of the public on rail guards.

## French teachers continue dispute over education cuts

Teachers in France held nationwide strike action on March 17 in their latest action to protest government plans to end the employment of thousands of classroom surveillance staff and education aides.

Up to 50 percent of staff participated in the strike, which saw a demonstration of 50,000 people in Marseilles that day. Some 12,000 demonstrated in Paris, and in many other towns protests were held of between 1,000 to 3,000 people.

The government also intends to transfer more than 100,000 non-teaching posts in the education sector currently under local authority control as part of its decentralisation plans. On March 15, union representatives broke off a meeting with three ministers where decentralisation plans were to be discussed. The FCPE (parent/pupil council) called on parents not to send their children to school.

## Indian workers strike on French construction site

Indian workers at Saint-Nazaire (Loire-Atlantique), a French navy seaport, took strike action last week. The workers are employed by a subcontractor, Avaco on the construction of the new Queen Mary 2 cruiser. Avaco is a branch of the Italian group Aerimpanti and the Indian Tata in alliance with the European AAB group.

Some 280 of the 700 employees working on the vessel are Indian technical personnel. The workers are paid according to the SMIC (minimal wage in France), although, they are well qualified and have

leading positions at the building site. Avaco subtracts from their wages 220 euros for social insurance and 350 to 450 euros for board and lodging. This has resulted in the workers having virtually nothing to send to their families in India.

Around 2,500 workers of the 13,200 employed on the cruiser are foreign nationals, with about 1,150 from non-European countries. Altogether 50 nationalities are present on the construction site.

#### **GIAT workers in France hold action day to save jobs**

On March 14 unions representing workers at GIAT, the French government's main tank and munitions manufacturer, called on their members at several plants to hold demonstrations and strikes in protest at planned job losses.

The exact number of jobs to be cut is unknown. GIAT management and the government have so far refused to give detailed information on future plans for the enterprise.

#### **Israeli teachers to protest planned job losses**

The Israeli education system is expected to be one of the hardest-hit by new budget plans. Up to 16,000 jobs are to be cut, while many employees face sharp wage reductions, according to the plan unveiled Monday March 17.

In response many teachers have threatened to take action. Teachers' Union Secretary-General Yossi Wasserman said the teachers would face no choice but to take industrial action, including strikes, if no way is found to avoid the job losses.

Finance Ministry Wages Director Yuval Rachlevsky told teachers representatives that wages could be slashed by up to 15 percent and benefits such as advanced training funds, *keren hishtalmut*, and pensions would also be hit.

Last week, Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Education Minister Limor Livnat that the ministry would have to cut teaching hours by almost one fifth due to an additional NIS 400 million cut in the education budget. The ministry said that it finances around 1.7 million teaching hours and that the new cuts will lead to a decrease of 320,000 hours or about 19 percent.

Other members in the education sector could face wage cuts of up to 20 percent according to the Union of Local Authorities chairman Adi Eldar. Wages of 40,000 kindergarten workers, inspectors, psychologists and other helpers in the sector could face cuts, he said. This followed last week's announcement that as of April 1, the ministry is planning to cut 20 percent of the funds it transfers to local authorities.

#### **Israeli civil service workers threaten strike**

The union of civil service workers announced last week that it was launching a campaign against government proposals to lay off thousands of public sector workers and cut wages.

The finance ministry reportedly wants to reduce civil service wages as part of an overall programme to plug a gaping 2003 budget hole. Meir Sheerit, minister without portfolio, has said public sector salaries will be cut by up to 20 percent.

Workers at the Histadrut trade union federation demanded that union representatives declare an industrial dispute—a legal precondition for taking any industrial action including strikes. The workers are protesting the agreement reached between the Histadrut and the Histadrut workers' representative that approved the voluntary retirement of 250-300 workers or a 20 percent wage cut spread out over 17 years. The workers claim that the agreement was reached "over their heads".

The Histadrut is seeking to cut its costs following the accumulation of heavy debts.

#### **Strike closes Israeli job centres**

Around 1,100 Employment Service workers went on strike March 13 closing 120 employment bureaus around the country.

The Civil Service Union approved the strike because "not a single

demand by the workers has been resolved." The workers committee had submitted a list of eight demands to the director general of the Employment Service, Avner Ofri. The top demand was the cancellation of the dismissal of 40 workers, including 12 at the service's main branch in Jerusalem.

#### **Strikes in Kenya**

Drivers at the leading Kenyan sugar miller, Mumias, have been on strike for two weeks demanding union recognition. Drivers stormed a meeting called over sugar prices and demanded that a senior manager be thrown out.

Mumias is also in dispute with local sugar farmers as it has cut the price of sugar cane. As a meeting was held between sugar bosses and farmers' representatives, police were called to protect five sugar factories because of protests by farmers and the striking drivers.

Also in Kenya about a 100 technicians at Telkom Kenya in the Nakuru region have gone on strike in opposition to the regional manager sacking employees without notice. The manager has accused the technicians of being incited by outsiders and claimed that those sacked were suspended for being involved in corruption scandals.

The technicians are demanding the sacking of both the regional manager and top management of the company. Union of Post Telecommunication Employees (Upte) branch chairman Derrick Wafula said that the strikers would flush out the top management if they did not resign. The union has asked for the Anti-Corruption Police Unit to investigate the alleged embezzlement of company funds in Nakuru.

#### **Platinum miners strike over funeral benefits**

Around 18,000 workers at a mine owned by Impala Platinum Holdings (Implats) have taken unofficial strike action. The mine is in the Impala Lease Area in North West Province, South Africa.

The strike began on the night of March 14 and involved about a third of the workforce to begin with. It later spread to the whole workforce.

The strike is in opposition to changes to funeral benefits decided upon at meetings between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and management. The NUM met strikers on March 18 in an attempt to persuade them to go back to work.

Implats is the world's second largest producer of platinum. The strike is costing Impala R24 million per day, according to management.

#### **Nigerian teachers on strike**

Teachers in Benue State, Nigeria have begun indefinite strike action over salary arrears, leave bonus, and lack of promotion that has caused many to remain in the same position for more than ten years. The teachers are also protesting the state government's refusal to refund excess tax deducted from their wages and the contributions they have to make to the National Housing Fund (NHF).

About 16,000 teachers are involved in the action, which has led to the closure of all the schools in the state. They will be joining a strike of teachers in the state's tertiary institutions including colleges of education, polytechnics and colleges of agriculture that is now in its fourth month.



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