

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

7 March 2003

German rail workers strike to demand pay increase

Rail workers in Germany have held a series of strikes this week in pursuit of a pay increase. On March 1, railway workers in North Rhine-Westphalia struck forcing the cancellation of some local services and delaying intercity express connections.

On March 4, strikes by 400 workers halted high-speed trains services in the three major southern German cities of Munich, Nuremberg and Regensburg. On the same day the leader of the Transnet rail union, Norbert Hansen, threatened to continue and expand the level of strikes until the union's demands were met. Transnet and the GDBA union have 160,000 members between them.

Rail unions are calling for a pay increase for their members of around five percent. The national rail company, Deutsche Bahn, who are offering an increase of 1.3 percent, has rejected this. Further strike action is planned for each day this week.

Strike action on suburban train services were to be held on March 6, according to the train drivers union GdL. The union has 35,000 members, nearly three-quarters of all German train drivers. The union stated that if negotiations do not result in agreement it would ballot workers for a full-scale strike. A large demonstration of rail workers is planned for Berlin on March 14.

London librarians and education staff strike

On March 4, workers at schools and libraries in London, England struck as part of a long-standing campaign to increase the level of the London weighting allowance—an extra payment made to public sector workers to compensate for the high cost of living in the capital.

The strike included librarians in 17 London boroughs, as well as school support staff, dinner ladies, janitors and classroom assistants at 70 schools.

The weeklong campaign of strike action is being held by the Unison and the Transport and General Workers Union, which are demanding a £4,000 flat-rate allowance. Currently London weighting payments range from £1,400 to £1,900 in Outer London and £2,600 in the centre.

The stoppages are set to continue next week involving

parking attendants, street cleaners and refuse collectors in Hackney and Newham.

Romanian steel workers demonstrate against planned redundancies

On March 1, thousands of Romanian steel workers held a demonstration in the western city of Hunedoara to protest against planned job cuts. The demonstration involved 5,000 workers from the local steel plant, as well as other workers from local industries.

A restructuring proposal by the government will lead to the loss of some 4,000 jobs at Hunedoara. On February 28 the minister for privatisation, Ovidiu Musetescu, said the plant was \$US260 million dollars in debt and losing \$500,000 per day.

GIAT workers in France strike to protest restructuring plans

Several hundred GIAT employees demonstrated on February 27 in the towns of Saint-Chamond, Roanne (Loire) and Toulouse (Haute-Garonne). GIAT produces military equipment for Frances armed ground forces, including Leclerc tanks (whose production is to be finalised), artillery systems and ammunition.

The CGT, CFDT and FO unions fear that some 3,000 of 6,700 GIAT jobs will be lost due to restructuring plans, the sixth in recent years. When GIAT was founded in the 1980s it employed nearly 18,000 workers. Some 3,500 jobs were eliminated during the last restructuring in 1999.

Unofficial information indicates that 750 workers at the Saint-Chamond plant will lose their jobs. On February 27, 250 workers demonstrated at Saint-Chamond and 400 of the 1,215 workers at Roanne took protest action. At Toulouse 90 percent of the workers took part in a strike lasting several hours while others blocked the factory entrance.

The French state is the major shareholder of the GIAT group.

Zambian teachers strike to win payment of arrears

Teachers in Katete, Zambia, are on strike in protest against the government's failure to pay their allowances for last month. They are members of the Zambia National

Union of Teachers.

At the high school in Katete, most teachers did not report for work and many pupils in the lower grades were sent home. The only people who turned up for work were expatriate teachers in management and those on temporary contracts.

Some teachers vowed to continue their strike until the government issued a statement on the withdrawal of their allowances.

The basic monthly take-home salary of Zambia's teachers and nurses is 300,000 kwacha (\$US60). A cost-of-living survey by the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflections (JCTR) calculates that an average family of six in January this year needed more than 1 million kwacha (\$208) per month for "basic needs".

Zambians living in the cities are severely affected by food and fuel price rises, in a country where 80 percent of the population live below the poverty line.

Davies Tembo, who works at a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), is paid \$50 a month. He explained, "When fuel prices go up in Zambia, prices of food and transportation go up as well.... With my 200, 000 kwacha, I can barely afford to buy a bag of mealie [corn] meal, which costs 50,000 kwacha [\$10], pay 50,000 kwacha rent for an unelectrified house, and the money is over. This means I have to walk to the office everyday and miss out on a number of things in order to ensure my wife and child at least survive on two small meals."

The government argues that public spending is restricted because of its \$6.5 billion debt to the international banks and \$108.3 million set aside for debt servicing in the 2003 budget.

Zambia's trade union federation has issued an ultimatum to the government to improve public service wages or face a nationwide strike.

Nigerian oil workers strike against Elf

Oil workers in Nigeria employed by the French company TotalFinaElf struck on March 3, after company security agents were accused of assaulting workers attempting to present their grievances to a visiting delegation from TotalFinaElf's international head office.

The strikers retaliated by locking out visitors to Elf's Headquarters Annex in Victoria Island, Lagos. On the following day oil workers picketed the company's offices in Lagos and Port Harcourt, chanting anti-management songs.

An Elf spokesman attempted to play down the situation, claiming that some workers had had a misunderstanding with some community youths.

The strike came barely two weeks after similar action Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR) workers. That strike was said to have played a part in the recent fuel crisis, which affected people across Nigeria, causing an acute shortage of petroleum and long queues at filling stations.

Elf is the fourth largest oil producer in Nigeria, producing more than 150,000 barrels of oil per day.

General strike in Swaziland calls for political reform

The Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU) and the Swaziland Federation of Labour called a two-day national strike on March 5 to press for political reforms from King Mswati III. SFTU Secretary-General Jan Sithole told reporters: "We wish to demonstrate our disgust that government is going against the advice of economists and purchasing a luxury jet for the king, when one-third of Swazis have no food to eat, and almost 40 percent of the people are HIV positive."

The strike also sought to highlight the crisis in the "rule of law", in which traditional authorities were pitted against court magistrates who have ruled against palace interests.

According to IRIN, some banks, all schools and post offices, and a few shops were closed on Tuesday, but government offices functioned as usual. An SFTU official reported that only skeleton crews remained at the sugar estates of the eastern lowveld, a stronghold of the labour movement.

The government challenged the strike's legality at the Industrial Court, which ruled in favour of the unions, designating the action as "industrial". The Federation of Swaziland Employers acknowledged the legitimacy of the mass action, but criticised a call made by strike leaders at the weekend for a boycott of all businesses that remained opened during the strike.

The workers federations belong to the two-month-old Swaziland Coalition of Concerned Civil Organisations, which includes the churches, human rights organisations and the Swaziland Chamber of Commerce and Industry. None of the coalition groups mobilised their memberships to support the anti-government action.



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