

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

30 July 1999

Ukrainian coal miners' relatives march to demand payment of wages

On July 22 a demonstration of nearly 1,000 from Krasnodon in eastern Ukraine took place to demand the payment of wages to coal miners who have gone unpaid for months. The demonstration was organised by relatives of the miners. About 630 women and 250 children marched to the town of Luhansk, about 60 kilometres from Krasnodon, to continue their protest. The Ukraine's Coal Ministry recently estimated that miners throughout the country are owed 1.9 billion hryvnias (\$478 million) in back pay.

Czech air traffic controllers issue strike warning in safety dispute

Air traffic controllers in the Czech Republic threatened to take strike action by July 31. The warning is the latest development in a long-running dispute. The controllers have said that unless their general manager, Petr Materna, is dismissed the strike will go ahead. The dispute arose because the controllers oppose the introduction of a new flight safety software package.

The staff claim that the management of the rizeni Letoveho Provozu (rLP), are trying to introduce the new system too hastily and that this will compromise flight safety. The (rLP) is the state-owned company responsible for controlling traffic in Czech air space.

For the last month, the Ministry of Transportation has been negotiating with representatives of the controllers and is to meet them again this week in an attempt to prevent strike action.

An industrial dispute would come at the peak of the holiday season, when an average of 17,000 travellers pass through Prague's Ruzyne Airport every day.

The president of the Czech Air Traffic Controllers Union, Antonin Tichy, said, "Once we accept the air traffic system, we are fully responsible for anything that would happen and as the tests have shown, it is not safe." The controllers have stated that, despite two years of intensive work on the new Eurocat 2000 control system, it still contained errors. The French-German corporation Air Sys is supplying the system.

Israeli public sectors workers strike to oppose privatisation

Public sector workers in Israel took strike action July 26 to protest the government's privatisation programme. Over 120,000 workers struck for several hours at the International Airport, ports, the state-run telecommunications company and other government workplaces.

The Histadrut trade union federation called the strike. Histadrut Chairman Amir Peretz said, "We can't allow ... management to

continue to dismantle the companies, to fire workers, to usurp their rights while they say 'look folks, the ministers are still learning their jobs. Give us time!'"

Workers at the International Airport went on strike between 0700-0900 GMT, preventing a number of departures and arrivals. Eleven flights were moved forward to leave before 0500 GMT, while six flights were delayed and took off after 0900. A spokesman for the union said, "The strike is going according to plan. At the ports no ships docked or set sail this morning."

Staff at the Bezeq Israel Telecom struck at 0900 GMT, while workers at the Israel Electric Corp. went on strike between 0900 and 1200 GMT.

The action was called to demonstrate sympathy with the workers at the state-owned Mekorot Water Company. They struck three weeks ago to demand an increase in wages and to oppose a plan to restructure and privatise the company.

Public sector workers demonstrate in South Africa

Tens of thousands of South African public sector workers held a one-day strike last Friday, following the breakdown of wage talks between unions and the government. Services were disrupted in most of the main cities and marches were held in Bloemfontein, Durban, Cape Town, Bisho, Kimberley and Pretoria.

The strike was focused on Pretoria, where about 20,000 workers took to the streets. Marchers handed over a memorandum outlining their pay demands to Public Service and Administration Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi.

A joint statement was issued by three unions, saying that the major problem faced in the public sector was the absence of a wages policy. They said this led to the wage negotiations always ending in deadlock. The unions demanded that the government make proposals for a wage policy and a new salary progression system, which could be negotiated with the unions and that the state stop announcing salary increases in Parliament before the start of negotiations.

The National Education and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) warned that "a full-blown strike" would begin today unless the government agreed to the demands. The proposed increase of 6 percent outraged the country's largest unions, which are demanding a 10 percent increase. The government then put forward a revised offer to increase the wages of the lowest earners by 6.2 percent. This was described by NEHAWU, South African Teachers Democratic Union and Police, Prisons and Civil Rights Union as "an insult". Negotiations between government and unions have been deadlocked since early this year, and the unions

are promising further actions across the country in the weeks ahead, with a general strike planned for July 29.

The protest by public sector workers is the latest in a series of blows to hit Mbeki's government, as mining companies prepare to lay off thousands of workers following the drop in the world gold price, and up to 27,000 railway jobs are forecast to be cut at Transnet. The building industry is preparing to slash 30,000 jobs.

The unions are warning the government that the growing numbers of unemployed will lead to civil strife, which both are anxious to avoid. All the unions involved are affiliates of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), one of the main groups to rally support for Mbeki's African National Congress in the recent elections. Their total membership is more than half a million.

Zimbabwe: Strike looms at Zimsec

A strike is looming at the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (Zimsec) after a management decision to renege on its promise of a 20 percent cost-of-living adjustment, made during last year's negotiations. Zimsec management will now grant just 17 percent, which has already been rejected by the work force of 230. The workers have taken their case up with the National Education Union of Zimbabwe. Last week, they began a "go-slow".

Brewery workers take action in Namibia

A dispute between workers in the Namibian Food and Allied Workers Union (Nafau) and Namibia Breweries has been referred to a mediator. There is little chance of the mediator meeting the workers' demand for a 42 percent increase, as the company is offering only 9 percent.

Nafau General Secretary Cuana Angula said negotiations on wages and other conditions of employment for 1999-2000, held between July 18 and 21, ended in deadlock. As a result, the union declared a dispute and reported their grievances to the Office of the Labour Commissioner. A mediation meeting has been set for August 12-13.

Namibian bank workers appeal against sacking

Fifteen workers sacked by the First National Bank branch at Oranjemund, the diamond capital, after a wildcat strike are awaiting the outcome of an appeal that took place on Monday. Management had initially insisted that the appeals be conducted individually, but gave in to their demand for a collective appeal hearing against the dismissals. They said the sackings were in response to the workers' week-long strike, which they claimed was held without exhausting all the avenues for solving the dispute. The workers insist they tried, unsuccessfully, to raise their grievances with management.

The bank employees went on strike on June 30 demanding the removal of the branch administrator, whom they accuse of racism and intimidation. The National Union of Namibian Workers has said it will help the workers and take the case to court if necessary.

Nigeria: Police and drivers clash at Ikeja

Shootings and stonings wracked Ikeja July 27 when the police force and commercial drivers clashed. The incident, according to eyewitness accounts, started around 7.30 a.m. local time along Agege Motor Road between Anifowose Railway Crossing and Airport Bus Stop.

The policemen, who had taken up positions there early that morning, had demanded money from a bus driver for an alleged violation. The driver refused to pay the money because, according to him, he committed no offence. Despite repeated appeals by the driver that he had no money with him that morning, the police refused to let him go.

Other commercial bus drivers became infuriated and staged a demonstration. The drivers accuse the police of extortion, collecting between N1,500 (\$15) and N5,000 (\$500) from them on a daily basis. The drivers barricaded the Agege Motor Road, causing a heavy traffic jam. Police fired tear gas to disperse the crowd, and the angry drivers answered by throwing stones. Business came to a standstill while the confrontation took place.

Police brutalise student protesters in Zambia

Ten Woodlands police station officers took turns in battering five University of Zambia (UNZA) students who were arrested on Saturday, after a demonstration at the Ministry of Education to register complaints over delays in reopening the institution.

Addressing a crowd of about 2,000 people at the meeting, including parents and university workers on Friday, the students' leader declared the attack would lead to an election defeat for the MMD (the ruling party). University students and Lusaka-based secondary school pupils declared they had officially launched a campaign to oust the MMD from power in 2001, citing government's failure in education as the reason for their move.

The pupils—chanting slogans against the MMD—were taken to the UNZA in minibuses from their respective schools and later tried to protest to the Ministry of Education, but were blocked by riot police who dispersed them using tear gas. Seven UNZASU (students union) executive members were rounded up after the protest.

UNZA undergraduate Christopher Zuze said five students were arrested at the residence of the press secretary. "We had already entered the gate when police walked in the yard and arrested all of us, soon after we disembarked from a bus which was supposed to take us back to the campus," he said. Soon after being taken to Woodlands police station, a group of about 10 police officers took turns beating them, using a belt taken from Zuze. Zuze sustained a swollen right side of the face and a cut on the right ear, while Humphrey Mulenga had whip marks and bruises on the back.

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