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Strike in the docks of Constanta

Europe's Eastern gateway blocked

In solidarity

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While hundred thousands of holiday-makers lay around choc-a-bloc sunbathing on the beach of the Black Sea, only few kilometers away the strikers prepare for a longer struggle. The union head-organisation FNSP has announced a solidarity strike in the entire port of Constanta for Monday.³

The cranes are still silent. The lorries have returned. The ships are waiting.

³ According to the Federatia Nationale a Sindicatelor Portuare (FNSP) the port of Constanta employs about 9,000 workers. In total thirty unions are affiliated to the FNSP, representing 6,000 members.

The second day of strike

Five big container ships lie off the terminal, waiting for the dispute to be solved. DP World tries to send some of the cargo work to be done by the ports in Odessa, Ukraine.

In the national television news there is hardly any information about the strike. Only a local channel broadcasted some news. But one of the dockers said convincingly: “It doesn’t really bother us, if they don’t report about us anyway. What is important is that here everything keeps being at stand-still. In the end the country will take notice of the blockade.”

It’s late afternoon. On the square in front of the main office 150 strikers have gathered again. Their faces display tense emotions.

The talks have failed. The management pretended to be unmoved and didn’t change their initial offer even one tiny bit. They even threatened to withdraw their current offer of about 100 Euro wage increase. A union leader and member of the negotiation table – he himself a dock worker in the port – reports in details to his fellow workers: “At some point the management all left the table saying ‘Right, we will meet again in front of the court. We will check whether the strike is legal at all. That’s it for us now, we don’t want to waste our time.’ They said that they have made plans for the weekend, that they will take a trip to the delta of river Danube, go fishing.” Many questions come up and long discussions start amongst the striking workers: what would be the result of a legal suspension of the strike, would the union pay strike money if the struggle carries on for a longer period of time? There isn’t much hesitation about the main question: The strike will be continued. We don’t give in! “Do you know what, guys, on Monday we will turn up and change our demands, as well. We will keep up the demand of a 700 hike, but not 700 RON, we talk about 700 Euro!”

In Romania the strike wave continues: on Thursday morning, 17th of July 2008, five hundred dock workers at the Agigea Sud terminal went on indefinite strike. The terminal belongs to the container port of Constanta, a town at the Romanian coast of the Black Sea. Their main demands: a wage increase of 700 RON (about 200 Euro), a bonus for seniority, extra-payment for over-time and a clear regulation of the working-time.

The author of this article has been in Constanta and was able to talk to the workers.

The first day of strike

At the main gate of the container port Constanta Agigea Sud a wind-torn leaflet announces an indefinite strike, starting at 7 am, 17th of July 2008. On the port premises no movements can be seen, the cranes remain silent and unused. The company has locked out the strikers. About 150 workers on picket-line have gathered at the gate, shouting slogans: “We work, and we want to be paid for it!”, “Thieves, thieves” and “We won’t be slaves in our own country!”. The Constanta South Terminal is run by DP World, well equipped with modern facilities. 85 per cent of the total container turn-over of Romania’s biggest port happens here. According to their own figures last year the company made twelve Million Euros profit.

Five years ago the terminal ran its first shift. When hired people were promised that the work would be done according to European standards and that soon (western-)European wages will be paid. To this day the latter had not happened. The port workers earn an equivalent to about 400 Euro per month. There was an increase: an increase in work pressure, in numbers of containers, which had to be shipped or unloaded per shift and an increase in over-time, which is still paid without any bonus payments.

The demand of 700 RON isn't that high if you take the current inflation in Romania into account. The price for (cooking and heating) gas has hiked by 20 per cent since the beginning of June 2008. The food prices are comparable to those of a discount supermarket like Aldi and Lidl in Western Europe. Many dockers had to take out loans in order to buy a car or a flat.¹ The inflation means it becomes increasingly difficult to pay the instalments demanded.

It is not only the wage issue which triggers the dock workers' anger. One of their most important demands is the adherence to the standard working-time. The terminal runs on a 12/24-hours shift-scheme, which means that a single shift is twelve hours long, after that the worker has got a 24-hours break. After each fourth shift there is a break of 48 hours. The workers have to switch constantly between day- and night-shift. The management does not stick to this scheme, workers are often called to work on their day off; they are supposed to start work within an hour. They have to be available on their mobile phones at all times. If they don't answer the phone the management puts it as 'unmotivated attitude', meaning that in the 'cartea de munca', the employee's record book, the remark 'absent without valid excuse' will be entered.² After three of these 'unauthorised absences' you get the sack. The striking workers tell that due to being permanently 'on call' they are not able to make plans for their free time with their families. Or as a docker puts it straight: "The work fucks you up and you are not even paid properly for it".

There is a cheerful and lively atmosphere at the picket-line. The sun blasts down, there is no shade in front of the head office. In an hourly routine the strikers gather in order to shout

¹ In Romania only few flats are rented out. The rents are very high. People who have been lucky own their home, house prices were low before 1989.

² A kind of income tax form containing remarks about the employee's performance.

their slogans and make some noise with horns and whistles. "The strike won't go on for too long, they have to fulfil our demands. We blockade the freight traffic of the whole country, even of some of the neighbouring countries. The big industrial areas depend on us!", states an older dock worker.

Suddenly an enormous chorus of car horns can be heard. On the other side of the terminal hundreds of lorries have queued up, waiting for their load. The strike has a heavy impact on the truck drivers, they are paid by kilometers, not by the hour. But most of them see the strike as a justifiable act, even though they have to return empty for today.

The strike is union lead. In the terminal two small unions are registered; both are affiliated to the FNSP – the National Trade Union Congress for Dock Workers. During conversations with the dockers it becomes clear that it was not the unions who had called for a strike, but that the workers had put pressure on them. "Last year they negotiated and signed a contract without asking us, and the contract was shit. They are in process of negotiating for five months now, but this time we are watching them closely!" – "To walk out is the only way to enforce our demands."

For the following day at 3 pm the management of WP World has staged a new round of negotiations. There are lively debates amongst the workers, because the negotiations are supposed to take place in Hotel Ibis, which is in twelve kilometer distance from the picket-line. One of the strikers thinks that it was wrong to have given in to the managements' proposal for the venue. "We are hundreds of strikers here, they should come here and negotiate with us. They have the space here to do that. Not behind our backs at some far away location".

At 7 pm the night-shift takes over the picket-line. According to the workers the company wouldn't find any scabs anyway, because the qualified workers have all gone abroad.