

Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

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Italian workers hold fourth general strike

On December 1, hundreds of thousands of workers held a 24-hour general strike in Italy to protest the economic and social policies of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. The protests are in opposition to Berlusconi's plans for \$8 billion in tax cuts to be raised largely by slashing public sector spending next year. The cuts follow demands by the European Commission that Italy reduce its public debt, the third largest in the world.

The protest and demonstrations were the fourth general strike in Italy since Berlusconi came to power in 2001. The industrial action hit many public and private sector sites throughout the country, including airlines, trains, hospitals and factories, post offices and government buildings. Many newsstands stood empty due to a printers' strike. Public sector workers who are negotiating for new contracts staged an eight-hour strike, resulting in state pharmacies, local government offices and ministries being closed for the day. The strike also hit museums, including the Uffizi Gallery and the Accademia in the city of Florence.

Thousands of workers and members of the public demonstrated in more than 70 towns and cities, sometimes in stormy weather conditions and heavy rain. In Venice, where the main square was flooded, 40,000 people are estimated to have joined the demonstration. In the industrial northern city of Turin, the home of the Fiat auto manufacturer, trade unions stated that 80 percent of public service workers participated in the stoppage. An estimated 55,000 attended the demonstration in the city centre and 100,000 people marched in Milan according to trade unions.

In the capital Rome, many protesters shouted anti-government slogans such as, "Where is my contract?" and "The government is a thief".

The government claims that the cuts will result in an increase in "real income" for the population at large. Maurizio Sacconi, a junior minister at the welfare ministry, told the *Il Giornale* newspaper: "I've never seen a strike against an increase of real income, which is what happens when taxes are reduced."

Irish ferry workers strike against job cuts

On December 2, 1,000 Irish ferry workers held a 24-hour strike, halting all Irish Ferries' sailings to Holyhead and Pembroke. The strike was called by Ireland's Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), following plans announced by the company to shed 150 staff on the French route. As part of the

action, hundreds of ferry workers and their supporters protested outside the Irish parliament in Dublin.

The company stated that the Dublin to Holyhead cruise ferry, the Holyhead to Dublin Swift fast ferry and the Rosslare to Pembroke services were affected by the industrial action. The Irish Continental Group PLC, the parent company of Irish Ferries, condemned the strike as illegal.

Irish Ferries suspended its French services this week for the winter season. It plans to begin them again in the spring using workers contracted from a foreign employment agency. SIPTU said the company had failed to negotiate with them and would exploit foreign workers on short-term contracts. SIPTU branch secretary Paul Smyth said: "We will mount an all-out strike until this issue is resolved."

Jaguar auto workers protest in Coventry, England

Workers employed at the auto makers Jaguar held a march and rally through the city of Coventry in the West Midlands on November 27 to protest at plans to end car assembly at the company's site in the Browns Lane area. Families and supporters of the workers also attended the protest. A total of 1,500 people attended, including employees from the firm's two other plants in Halewood, Merseyside and Castle Bromwich in the West Midlands.

Jaguar is owned by Ford, which announced on September 17 that it planned to cease production of XK and XJ Jaguars in Coventry. The company said the cuts were necessary as part of a restructuring of the company as it is losing hundreds of millions of pounds.

Jaguar plans to implement 400 voluntary redundancies while a further 425 jobs will be moved to the Castle Bromwich factory in Birmingham. As part of the restructuring the company also plans to axe 750 mostly white-collar staff, as it merges its administrative facilities with Land Rover.

Next week staff at the plant are to be balloted by trade unions on industrial action, with the result expected to be announced in mid-December.

Vauxhall workers in Cheshire, England protest job terminations

Vauxhall auto workers at Ellesmere Port, in Cheshire, England protested on November 29 over the ending of 46 temporary contracts. Hundreds of employees were involved in the protest.

The workers, members of the Transport and General Workers Union, are to be balloted next week for industrial action. The union said that since the temporary workers involved had been

employed at the plant for two and a half years, the contract terminations were compulsory redundancies, and that it was valid claim for unfair dismissal on their part.

Israeli bus workers strike

Bus drivers in Be'er Sheva went on strike November 25 due the company board's refusal to open negotiation with the drivers' union on improvements of working conditions. The Metrodan employees have demanded the signing of a cooperative work agreement with the management.

The Metrodan bus company started operating in Be'er Sheva last year. The drivers have complained over low wages and the company's policy of fining employees for disciplinary and traffic offences.

Following the collapse of the talks on November 24 between the board of directors, the drivers' union and Histadrut trade union federation representatives, the drivers decided to launch an indefinite strike. A member of the drivers' workers committee, Shaul Tsfani, said: "At present, 95 percent of the buses are out of commission, the strike will continue as long as management continues to refuse to sit down and speak to us seriously."

According to a company spokesman: "The management takes a grave view of the actions of parties with vested interests that have shut down the public transport and are harming the residents of the city. The company has managed to operate a limited number of central bus lines and it is examining additional alternatives for restoring public transportation to its previous format."

Strike of 40,000 Israeli bank workers looms

Israeli banking union leaders are threatening strike action over the prospect of implementing the Bachar capital market reforms, which would force the banks to sell off their mutual and provident funds.

The head of the Israel Discount Bank workers' committee, Ricki Bachar, said: "I will demand to close all bank branches in Israel, and to bring all 40,000 bank and stock exchange workers out on strike until further notice, in response to the Bachar panel."

It is calculated that forcing the banks to sell off their funds—the banks currently dominate the market—would result in the loss of jobs of most of the 2,000 employees working in the field.

Lime workers continue strike in Zambia

Workers at the Ndola Lime Company have refused to return to work even though their union has signed a deal with management.

National Energy Sector and Allied Workers Union general secretary Yotam Mtayachalo said the workers should return to work. They have refused because they want the removal of three managers: the general manager Mr Mwandabai, the chief accountant Jonathan Mwale and the head of human resources James Mwape.

The stoppage will hit copper production, which depends upon lime.

Kenyan hospital workers stop work twice in one week

Kenyatta National Hospital in Nairobi was brought to a standstill twice in the same week, as 500 doctors, nurses and support staff stopped work over salary arrears. The first stoppage was on November 26, and the second on November 30. Workers blocked the exits of the administration building, demanding that hospital board chairman Professor Alfred Mutema pay their salaries and

release a report on corruption at the hospital.

They had gathered to find out when their salaries would be paid and to hear Mutema give details of the corruption investigation, after questions were raised about a Sh224 million (US\$2.8m) equipment deal made by the hospital management. But Mutema told them that the Finance and Health Ministries were holding the payment of salaries and that the report was based on old information.

Staff representatives demanded to know why some patients were being forced to sleep three to a bed, despite paying full fees.

When Mutema left the meeting accompanied by security guards, the staff responded by barricading the administration building. They kept up the protest until 3.30 that afternoon.

On November 30, workers who were protesting outside the administration block were forced to run for safety, as armed policemen moved in to disperse them.

Shoprite strike highlights poverty wages in Malawi

A month after shop workers in Malawi went on strike in the face of intimidation from management and the courts, it has now come to light that Shoprite had been paying them as little as K200 (US\$1.89) per week. The workers had closed down around 300 Shoprite supermarkets throughout the country from October 29. On November 1, High Court judge George Chimasula-Phiri granted Shoprite an injunction demanding an end to the strike.

Following talks attended by officials from the Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU) and Shoprite officials from South Africa, the workers were given a rise of 61 percent, taking the lowest wages to US\$3.04 per week (43 cents per day).

MCTU secretary general Austin Kalimanjira told the *Malawi Nation* the 61 percent increase could be justifiable, and said the dispute was the result of a lack of "proper communication" between management and workers. The MCTU has announced that as a result of its discovery of the poverty wages paid by Shoprite, it will carry out a survey into the working conditions at other private companies and embassies.



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