Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to: editor@wsws.org

Europe

Postal workers in Ireland strike over pay

Postal workers in Ireland held a one day strike and rally on December 8. The Communications Workers' Union (CWU) said that it was likely the dispute against An Post would escalate unless workers were granted the money due to them since last November under the terms of a national pay agreement. The industrial action stopped postal deliveries and led to the closure of 93 An Post offices.

On November 26, CWU workers voted 9-1 in favour of industrial action if any existing agreements are breached. At that point the union served seven days strike notice on An Post. The company contends that the strike is in breach of procedures and that the CWU's grievances are baseless.

The Irish Minister for Communications, Noel Dempsey, is set to meet the board of An Post and the CWU next week regarding a resolution of the dispute.

Transport workers in Norway strike against privatisation

On December 7, railway workers in Norway held strike action for part of the day to protest against plans to privatise Norwegian Rails. The stoppage involved 1,000 workers and resulted in all trains being halted for three hours in the early afternoon.

The same day, public transport workers in Oslo held strike action in support of the rail workers, resulting in all public transport stopping for one hour between 1 pm and 2 pm.

Russian chemical workers end hunger strike

On December 6, workers at the acid-processing workshop of the Krasnouralsk chemical plant in the Sverdlovsk region ended their hunger strike over unpaid wages. The hunger strike began on December 2. On December 5, 24 participants in the hunger strike received their full wages for 11 months. Two days prior, three women workers whose health was rapidly deteriorating, finally received their back pay.

Alexander Korelin, chairman of the plant's trade union committee, said that staff had received promises that all wage arrears for three months would be paid in the near future. Korelin said, "If the people do not get their money, protests may be resumed. Some staff members have already announced their readiness to begin a hunger strike to get their wages".

Workers are owed pay over a period of 11 months amounting to a total of 50 million roubles (about $US1.8 million).

Last week Krasnouralsk prosecutor's office opened a criminal case against Alexander Prokopyev, acting director of the federal unitary enterprise, Krasnouralsk chemical plant, over the wage arrears. The plant manufactures explosives, household and industrial chemical products and employs more than 2,000 people.

Cigarette factory workers in Switzerland strike over closure plans

One hundred and fifty Swiss cigarette factory workers began strike action last week to protest against plans that could result in the closure of the plant. The industrial action began on December 2 at the factory located in the town of Crissier. Workers continued the strike over last weekend as trade unions entered into negotiations with management on the plant's future. On December 4, some 500 workers and their supporters participated in a protest rally near Lausanne.

Workers fear that Bunzl will close the plant as the company has already moved some of its machinery to Britain. Filtrona has threatened to dismiss striking workers, denouncing the action as illegal.

The plant was purchased one year ago by the British-based multinational Bunzl group, and was then integrated into its Filtrona division, which mainly manufactures cigarette filters. Filtrona employs nearly 5,000 people worldwide, including some 150 in Crissier, where it has operated the plant for more than 30 years.

Middle East

Israeli bank staff renew disruptions

After a ten-day break, staff at the Israel Discount Bank renewed their dispute over the bank's privatisation. Following a workers' committee decision, the staff struck the bank's business division. The bank staff also plan to shut down 20 branches this week, as well as the foreign trade branch before the weekend.

An unnamed committee source said workers intended to sabotage proceedings by failing to supply management with financial data it needs for its quarterly report. "We will withhold the data even if management files suit against us in the labour court and the judge orders us to hand it over," said the source.

Workers at Israel Discount Bank decided to restart the strike after talks with M.I. Holdings, which is handling the bank's privatisation, broke down. Executives at M.I. Holdings rejected the bank committee's demand to extend the current collective work agreement by five years and to guarantee that the bank would not sell any of its holdings for 10 years after its sale. They also rejected the committee's demand that the bank award employees a

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bonus in wake of the privatisation.

The national trade union chairman, Ricky Bachar said, "Disruptions in the bank are meant to remind the buyers and sellers of the bank that there's another player on the field. The state and the potential buyers should consider if privatising the bank is worthwhile without its 5,500 workers."

Africa

Nigerian judiciary staff take strike action

Members of the Judiciary Staff Association of Nigeria (JUSAN) began indefinite strike action on December 6 in support of their demand for higher wages. *This Day* (Lagos) reported that all over the country judges, lawyers and other officials were prevented, by the striking workers, from gaining access to the courts. At Ikeja High Court the main gate was securely locked as soon as the strike began.

The judicial workers had previously taken strike action from November 1 to 5, after which JUSAN issued a threat of further industrial action in a month unless their grievances were addressed.

The Lagos State Chief Judge, Justice Ade Alabi, has declared the present strike illegal.

Kenyan hospital strikers promised pay rise

There have been a series of strikes involving medical staff at the Kenyatta National Hospital in support of a demand for an increase in salaries in line with a new pay package awarded to workers in the Civil Service six months ago. Workers at the hospital have downed tools three times in the last two weeks—the last occasion being on December 5. They are also demanding the payment of an increment on housing allowance and commuting and strenuous work allowances, which were promised last January.

According to the *East African Standard* (Nairobi), doctors, nurses and support staff at the hospital stopped work on December 1 and marched to the offices of Health Minister Charity Ngilu. They compelled her to accompany them back to the hospital to hear their complaints. She promised a further meeting on December 5 to explain why an adjustment of their salaries had not been made.

Ngilu gave verbal assurances that they will be awarded a pay rise. She insisted that the strikers were not covered by Civil Service pay and conditions of service because the hospital was a parastatal. She assured them that in light of the new guidelines for parastatals agreed by the government on November 23, she would instruct the hospital's board to pay them accordingly. However, she has insisted that they will have to wait till mid-January to give her time to study the new guidelines on terms and conditions of service for parastatals.

According to the *Standard* the ministers remarks "drew loud murmurs of discontent from the protesting workers, but staff welfare officials led by Obuya Obengo prevailed upon their colleagues for tolerance on condition that the arrears would be backdated to July 1."

One doctor complained to the paper about having to "contend with high number of patients and a crippling staff shortage."

Another doctor said that morale was low because vital pieces of equipment needed for special care were obsolete, missing or broken down.

There were also complaint of corruption, shortage of staff, diminishing supplies, lack of welfare and nepotism.

In a letter to a Task Force investigating problems at the hospital the doctors wrote, "The entire staff feels despised by the central government on matters of salary and other emoluments. We in KNH always have to beg or even riot to be given what rightly belongs to us.... The staff is faced with various occupational hazards.... This is evident in the rise in TB, HIV/Aids, back problems and pregnancy complications."

All-out strike of Nigerian doctors

Nigerian resident hospital doctors began an all-out strike on December 6 in protest against the non-payment of their arrears of salaries and entitlements. As a result, activities at hospitals and health centres across the country have come to a standstill.

The striking doctors are members of the National Association of Resident Doctors (Nard), whose president Oguzie Jerry told the *Daily Champion* that the action followed the expiration of a 21-day ultimatum given to the government to settle all arrears of entitlements and salaries. The government is also being urged to address the decay of facilities in government hospitals and the health institutions across the country.

The strikers are demanding payment in full of their November salaries, the implementation of a 22 percent increment on basic salary, payment of all arrears and payment for professional examinations. They are also demanding "the payment of leave grants, annual increments, teaching allowance and other allowances and the promotion of members of the association."

Doctors at some hospitals are owed between three and four months salary and the strikers claim that since February 2004 the issue of percentage payment of salaries has become the norm rather than the exception in tertiary health institutions.

Dr Olurotimi Olojede, president of the Association of Resident Doctors (ARD) at Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) told the *Champion*, "It was unfortunate that the doctors had to consider strike as the only option because the last salary they received was in August 2004 which is quite unbearable as they can no longer cope with their present economic hardship."

He added that past incidents have shown that "when we make demands or threats to take industrial action, quick promises are made by government but never kept".

One of LUTH's resident doctors told the paper that in the past decades, there were no reports of doctors going on strike, "but now, the situation in the health sector is so bad. The workers don't get paid; we don't have our daily bread. It is being denied us, hence we have to take this hard decision."

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