

Workers Struggles: Europe, the 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

Russian factory workers begin hunger strike

On December 20, factory workers in the town of Ivdel in the Sverdlovsk region of Russia began a hunger strike over unpaid wages. Fifteen employees began the strike including eight women. By December 23, the number of strikers participating was increased to 30. At the time of writing, one of the women strikers had been hospitalised due to effects of the hunger strike.

Some 800 workers lost their jobs when the plant closed on July 1, 2004. Following this a bankruptcy committee was established. The plant owes its employees at least 30 million rubles in overdue wages for the previous two years. Two criminal cases against the company have been opened. These relate to the non-payment of salaries and tax evasion.

Brewery workers in northeast England continue strike

Brewery workers employed in Gateshead, northeast England, continued their dispute with the Federation Brewery by holding a two-day strike beginning on December 21. The employees are striking over details of a 3.2 percent pay deal offered by the company.

Teaching assistant union postpones strike

On December 21, a trade union representing striking teaching assistants in the town of Brighton and Hove in the south of England postponed a fourth day of industrial action. The action was due to begin on January 6 but the Unison trade union announced that it would be cancelled to allow more time for an agreement to be reached with the council. The GMB trade union is also involved in the dispute.

The workers have been in dispute with the council

over plans to cut the number of weeks they are paid for. The stoppages have affected many schools in the area and thousands of children who have stayed at home during the closure.

The council supported the postponement but was careful to state that it would not accept the demands of the trade union. Council leader Ken Bodfish the authority could not write a “blank cheque” for schools to pay their teaching assistants.

Middle East

Bus workers continue industrial action in Israel

Be'er Sheva bus workers in Israel continued their four-week long industrial action this week, following the breakdown of talks between the Metrodan bus company, and the Histadrut Labour Federation and Transportation Minister Meir Sheetrit.

The strike began when Metrodan refused to recognise a trade union formed by drivers and would not negotiate with it. The union was formed in order to demand higher pay and to help end the imposition of draconian fines on drivers who commit infractions.

Ran Krol, the company CEO, rejected a proposal from the Labour Federation and Transportation Minister Meir Sheetrit. Histadrut had offered to end the industrial action if Metrodan began immediate negotiations over a collective agreement with its workers.

Metrodan issued a statement following this that read in part: “The company’s management is sticking to the principle of preserving managerial independence and preventing the union’s attempt to take control of the company. Management decided not to throw sand in the eyes of the transportation minister and the Histadrut chairman by agreeing to another month of negotiations that would lead in the end to another strike.”

Histadrut said that the strike would now be escalated and that, “Metrodan’s management is behaving

arrogantly by refusing to sign a collective agreement and is thereby infringing on the right to organise”.

Electricity workers to strike in Lebanon

Workers employed at the Electricite du Liban (EDL) in Lebanon announced on December 23 that they would begin industrial action on December 29. The employees are to strike over the government’s failure to provide retired employees with basic medical coverage and financial security.

EDL is a state-owned company, and is currently \$3 billion in debt. Such is the crisis facing the company that it cannot afford to buy enough fuel to keep Lebanon’s electric lights on for 24 hours a day. The company’s annual losses total a third of annual government expenditures and, according to Middle East economic analysts, it is mooted that the company will be fast-tracked for privatisation.

Africa

Kenya university workers strike to defend colleagues

On December 15, over 1,000 non-teaching staff went on strike at the Njoro campus of Egerton University in protest at the suspension of two of their colleagues. The strikers said they would refuse to return to work until the two were reinstated. The strike leaders belong to an unregistered union for non-teaching staff.

The workers sent a letter to the Vice-Chancellor Ezra Maritim, which was quoted in the *Nation* newspaper: “It is our position as workers that corruption in this institution has become endemic. We are dismayed by the administration’s cavalier stand on this issue.”

The two members of staff were suspended after they were said to have sent a statement to the press alleging that the university was paying 600 ghost workers, and that it had already lost Sh500 million (\$US6.3m) through such fraud. The statement was sent to the Kenya Anti-Corruption Authority two weeks ago. The statement claimed that a don who left the university more than a year ago was being paid more than Sh100,000 (\$US1,268) per month, or that the amount was disappearing from the payroll into someone else’s hands.

The workers said the two suspended employees had no links to the whistleblowers. They denied reporters access to the administration block, explaining that they wanted to avoid the risk that the media would distort their case.

Kenyan nurses strike

Nurses at a Kenyan hospital went on strike on December 20 protesting that 30 babies a month are dying at the Pumwami Maternity Hospital because of conditions at the hospital.

“I always have sleepless nights because of the deaths I see here. Let the government take this issue seriously,” said one nurse, who would not be named for fear of victimisation.

“In November, 37 babies died and so far this month 26 have passed away. In a week we can record 7 deaths of mothers because we are few,” another nurse told reporters.

Nurses say that the hospital is understaffed. It deals with 100 births a day with only 80 staff. They also have to run the newborn clinic, which admits 130 babies a day.

Pumwami hospital is the biggest maternity hospital in Kenya and serves a mainly poor population. Nurses complained that not only were they overworked but their salaries have not been paid.



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