

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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Europe

Thousands of Maltese workers protest government plans to cut public holidays

Thousands of people demonstrated in Malta on January 10 to protest government plans to cut the number of public holidays. The demonstration, called by the GWU trade union federation and supported by a number of unions, began at the Opera House and marched through the main Republic Street. Unions present included, the Airline Pilots' Association, the Malta Union Haddiema Bank Centrali, the Cabin Crew Union, the Air Malta Engineers Association and the Malta Union of Teachers, Malta Union Bank Employees and six others.

A rally was organised in front of Queen Victoria Square as part of the demonstration and was addressed by GWU secretary general Tony Zarb and eight other union officials. It was held adjacent to the parliament building where members were discussing amendments to the National and Public holidays act.

Following the protest, Zarb and other leaders presented a letter to Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi and Opposition Labour party leader Alfred Sant. The content of the letter revealed that the unions are not opposed in principle to the number of public holidays being cut.

The letter calls on the government not to introduce measures that would effect the rest days of employees unless the unions and all "social partners" approve these. It also called on the Labour Party to offer alternative solutions.

Gonzi said that government was only concerned with establishing a national agreement that would improve productivity and competitiveness.

Brussels transport workers continue dispute against STIB/MIVB

Public transport workers in Brussels, Belgium took industrial action on January 10, in an ongoing dispute over pay and conditions with transport operator STIB/MIVB.

The stoppage was called by the CGSP trade union and brought half the capital city's buses and trams to a halt. The CGSP represents about a third of the STIB workforce. Alex Vonck, a spokesman for the union said that, "When you look at the number of people we represent and look at the number of vehicles that were in circulation, our strike was a relative success".

Workers at bankrupt Russian alcohol processing plant begin hunger strike

On January 12, workers at the Ivdel Hydrolysis alcohol processing plant in the city of Ivdel, Russia began a hunger strike in pursuit of more than 10 million rubles (\$357,000) in overdue wages. The strike is the latest in a series of stoppages that began in December. As a result of the protests some employees were paid in full but the majority of the plant's 700 workers only received a portion of the money they are owed.

More than 70 workers are involved in the latest action and employees are demanding that all outstanding monies be paid.

The plant was declared bankrupt in October 2003 and due to increasing debt it was closed permanently in June last year.

This week the Industry Ministry's regional branch said the strikers were unlikely to be paid their outstanding wages because no money was available to pay company's debts.

Irish psychiatric nurses strike against South Eastern Health Board

Some 170 Irish psychiatric nurses took strike action on January 10 over the failure of the Irish South Eastern Health Board to provide them with a safe working environment. The workers, based at the St Lukes Hospital in Clonmel, reported for duty on January 10 but would only work on emergency cases.

Staff at the hospital claim that management have not investigated several complaints against a senior nurse manager. As a result the Psychiatric Nurses Association that organised the stoppage is calling on the Health Services Executive to intervene in the dispute.

Africa

Guinean teachers strike to win pay rise

Teachers in Guinea began an indefinite, nationwide strike on January 10 to demand a 40 percent pay rise. Many of the school students in the capital city of Conakry took the opportunity to hold anti-government demonstrations, which then came under attack from riot police. No arrests, however, have been reported.

Guinean Teachers' Federation secretary general Bamba Camara said that the national strike was to demand a 40 percent pay rise now, and for future pay rises to be set according to a formula negotiated with the government in 2000.

The average monthly salary for a teacher in Guinea is around 250,000 francs (US\$70), but Camara told the UN-sponsored IRIN website that this was no longer enough to live on, due to the increasing cost of food and transport.

The strike was expected to prevent the planned reopening of Conakry University on January 11, due to support from university lecturers. The government closed down the university in December last year, as its response to student protests against plans demolish their dormitories and build more classrooms.

Camara described teachers' wages as laughable. "Transportation alone eats over half of their salaries, while there are other obligations like rent, electricity and water bills, and you know the price of a bag of rice nowadays is anything between 60,000 francs [\$17] and 80,000 francs [\$22]," he said.

The last teachers' strike in Guinea was over a decade ago. It brought all the schools to a halt, and the government was forced to agree to a 100 percent pay rise.

Now, many of the eight million people in Guinea are becoming increasingly angry. In recent months, miners, railway workers, students and residents have taken to the streets to oppose increased food prices and electricity bills, combined with unpaid or inadequate wages.

Chocolate workers strike for second time in two months

About 2,200 workers at the Nestlé chocolate factories in South Africa have been on strike since January 3, after talks broke down for the second time in two months. Members of the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) held a one-day national strike on December 14, in opposition to the management's "confrontational" stance. Now, one month later, the workers are still facing Nestlé's refusal to offer any more than 6.4 percent. FAWU is demanding 8 percent. The strikers intend to march to the Nestlé headquarters in Randburg on January 14.

FAWU told the South African Press Agency: "The company left the union with no option but to embark on a full-blown strike." The union said that the strike was starting to take effect at the plants in several South African towns.

Nigerian doctors set to end strike as nurses threaten to walk out

As Nigerian doctors prepared to return to work as soon as they receive a written confirmation of the government intention to pay their entitlements, nurses and midwives threatened to go on strike, if their salaries and allowances were not paid.

They said the ultimatum was the result of untold hardship caused by their employers' refusal to pay them for several months. The resident doctors have been on strike for the last six weeks as a result of government underpayment to hospitals, which led to the doctors' allowances and salaries going unpaid.

National Association of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives president Linus Sabulu told the *Daily Champion*: "[The] government has remained adamant and insensitive to the issues raised, particularly the non-payment of our salaries and allowances, which in some hospitals, are in the arrears of 17 months."

On January 10, non-academic workers in tertiary health institutions started a one-week warning strike to oppose the reduction of personnel costs, which has also led to staff being underpaid.



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