Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East & Africa

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Europe

Protests continue in Germany against welfare cuts

Protesters in German held demonstrations on January 3 to oppose cuts in unemployment benefits and other attacks on welfare rights. Demonstrators protested in a number of towns and cites nationwide, including in Berlin where 15 people were arrested during scuffles with police.

The cuts are being introduced under new legislation known as Hartz IV. The government claims this will cut unemployment that is currently at 10.8 percent of the workforce. In Berlin, riot police with tear gas and pepper spray attacked demonstrators in an attempt to prevent several hundred demonstrators from entering the unemployment office in Wedding, a working-class area of Berlin.

Demonstrations were also held in Nuremberg, Stuttgart, Dresden, Munich and other smaller towns and cities. Many of these were held outside job centres in an attempt to close them for the day to disrupt the introduction of the legislation. In the city of Leipzig, eastern Germany, some of those protesting were eventually able to enter a job centre to present their grievances.

A spokesman for the Federal Labour Agency in Nuremberg said that all unemployment offices in Germany stayed open during the protests and that, “It was all pretty harmless. There were demonstrations, as announced, but there were no large numbers of people.”

The protests are the latest in a series of strikes and demonstrations against Hartz IV with many being held last year in Leipzig and mainly other eastern German cities. On January 4, it was announced that the number of unemployed in Germany in seasonally unadjusted terms increased by 206,900 to reach 4.464 million in December. This was the highest figures for seven years.

H&M chain store workers continue action

Staff employed by the Swedish fashion chain H&M in France continued their pay dispute strike action this week. Employees rejected by a large majority a pay offer of 6.2 percent for staff with over two years’ service.

The CGT trade union representing the workers said that more than 50 percent of H&M’s French workforce has been employed for less than two years. The union is demanding an 11 percent salary increase for all employees.

The strike began over a pay dispute on December 13. Since then workers had blockaded the central H&M warehouse in the town of Le Bourget, which supplies all the company’s 63 stores.

On December 28, some days before winter clearance sales begin in France, police broke up the blockade. On Christmas Day, the law court located in the town of Bobigny ruled that the workers end their industrial action before Monday at 9 a.m. In a ruling blatantly favouring H&M, the court also demanded that each striking worker pay a compensation fee about 1,500 euros (about $US2,000).

Following this ruling, unions representing workers called off the blockade and agreed to hold a mediation meeting on January 10 with management regarding the dispute. Some 300 workers are employed at the Le Bourget warehouse and H&M employs a total of nearly 3,000 workers throughout France.

Paediatricians hold strike action in France

On January 3, 90 percent of the “free working” 2,800 French paediatricians held a 24-hour strike. Several trade unions organised in the SNPF (Syndicat National des Pédiatres Francais), have demanded an increase in fees their members receive and for more favourable regulations regarding duty servitudes. The SNFP said that industrial action would be repeated until their demands are fulfilled. Paediatricians first held strike action in this dispute in 2002.

On average the paediatricians work 96 days a year of compulsory labour in specialised birth hospitals without any payment. They also receive no pay for their presence at emergency centres in towns in France. For one regular consultation they get a fee of about 30 euros ($US40) and do not receive any further pay for weekend shifts.

The action takes place in the framework of protests against government measures to reform the health assurance scheme, established by doctors’ organisations and health assurance institutions. Under a new agreement in force since January 1, wages for paediatricians increased by just 2 euros. General doctors were given an increase of about 5 euros for one treatment of children younger than two years of age.

Casino workers strike called off in France

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On December 20, four French trade unions called off industrial action due to be held on New Year's Eve by 17,000 casino workers. The unions ended the dispute after signing an agreement with employers Casinos de France and the Syndicat des Casinos Modernes.

The action had initially been called by the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail), FO (Force Ouvrière) and CFDT (Conf. Francaise Démocratique du Travail) trade unions.

Workers had threatened to stop work on what would have been the busiest and most lucrative night of the year. Trade unions had originally demanded six extra vacation days per year as compensation for working regular night shifts, 25 percent higher wages for night work, and the establishment of a provision system for all employees. Some 90 percent of the Casino workers earn the legally regulated minimum wage and increasingly have to rely on declining tips from casino customers.

Under the new agreement workers would receive a pay increase of three to four percent. Casino management rejected the demand for six extra vacation days. Negotiations regarding casino night-work regulations and compensation will continue between management and trade unions in the first quarter of this year. Last year annual revenues for casinos in France reached a record 2.6 billion euros (3.5 billion dollars).

Middle East

Israeli teachers protest education reforms

On January 4, around 10,000 Israeli teachers protested at Tel Aviv's Nokia Arena against the educational reform plans outlined in the Dovrat Commission report. The protest was organised by the two main teaching trade unions. The demonstration was the largest-ever organised by a professional union with teachers being brought in on 200 buses.

Trade union leaders Yossi Wasserman and Ran Erez condemned the commission for not consulting with trade unions and teachers and for proposing the possible mass dismissal of tens of thousands of teachers in the report.

A number of those protesting including school principals, ministry inspectors and other officials, wore badges stating "Education is us" and others carried signs saying "Limor Livnat is harmful," "Educational reform—not on the backs of the teachers" and "Fewer children per class reduces violence."

Banking workers in Israel continue dispute against bank merger

Banking workers employed by the United Mizrahi Bank in Israel continued strike action last week by holding a strike on December 30. The stoppage resulted in the closure of all 120 branches of the bank. The workers are protesting plans to merge Mizrahi with its subsidiary, Tefahot, the country's largest mortgage bank.

The bank attempted to play down the implications of a merger on staff saying that following the merger with Tefahot, the bank's branches will not be slashed to 60 as feared, but to 110, 45 of which will be upgraded. It also claimed that every worker would receive two weeks' salary as a "merger bonus".

The workers committee representing Mizrahi employees said that staff were increasingly uncertain of their future. The committee said that workers had become "pawns ... without rights" in management's strategy.

Africa

General strike in Sierra Leone

Trade unions in Sierra Leone held a three-day general strike to demand improvements in pay and conditions, before making an agreement with the government and suspending the action.

The Sierra Leone Labour Congress, the main trade union federation, called the strike late on Monday January 3. President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah first tried to lessen the strikers' anger by cutting the price of petroleum products by 20 percent, in line with one of the strikers' demands. On Tuesday, the country ground to halt for the first time since the end of the civil war. On Wednesday morning, union leaders announced that they were suspending the strike after making progress in their talks with the government. However, it took some time before normal work resumed. The government agreed to raise the threshold at which employees start to pay income tax from 10 million to 20 million leones ($US3,500 to $US7,500) per year and to make other tax concessions.

Demands that were not covered in the agreement that ended the strike were for an increase in the minimum wage (currently 40,000 leones or $US16.30 per month), a reduction in income tax and increases in pay. One bag of rice, barely sufficient to feed a family for a month, costs 65,000 leones ($US26.50). Three years after the end of the civil war, three quarters of Sierra Leone's population of five million live on an income of less than $US2 per day.

Moroccan pharmacists strike to oppose new law

Pharmacists in Morocco held a one-day strike on December 29 to oppose the introduction of a new draft law, which union leaders said had been drawn up without any consultation. The strikers belonged to the National Federation of Moroccan Trade Union of Pharmacists (Fnspm). According to the union the law would not give protection to either pharmacists or the general public against "various illegal drug marketing networks".

"This strike action was widely followed by pharmacists in different regions of the kingdom," the Fnspm chairman, Kamal Belhaj Soulami told the Angolan Press Agency. He said the strike was in protest at the "difficult situation" facing many of the 7,500 pharmacists, a third of whom are "threatened with bankruptcy".

The union said that it would call another strike on January 7 if the government failed to pay heed to their demands.

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