

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Europe

French rail workers hold industrial action

Railway workers employed by the state-controlled SNCF network in France began wildcat strike action on the evening of January 25, following the reported rape of a female ticket inspector after she tried to charge a man for not having a ticket on a train between Toulouse and Cahors, in southern France. The man was later arrested at his home.

The strike spread very quickly affecting rail services nationwide. In some regions no trains ran, while in others just one out of three or four ran as scheduled. The largest strike participation was in the Lille region. During the evenings of January 26 and 27: no scheduled night-trains ran.

The strike action lasted almost three days before services returned to normal. On January 26, negotiations between the SNCF and several rail unions began in an attempt to resolve the dispute. After five hours of negotiations, the creation of 100 supplementary security jobs (50 of them had been already planned for the current budget) was announced.

The strike demonstrated the increased tension amongst employees as a result of SNCF "liberalisation" measures that have seen the implementation of severe cuts in safety. In 2004, SNCF management had counted 487 acts of aggression on SNCF employees (27 percent on women).

Belgium health and service workers protest to demand better conditions

Health and service workers demonstrated in Brussels, Belgium, on January 27 to demand better working conditions. Several thousand public health and services workers as estimated to have participated in the protest.

The action involved trade unions involved in the health and service industry. Employees at a hospital in the city held strike action to coincide with the demonstration.

Fiat auto workers strike in Italy

Fiat auto workers in Italy took industrial action on January 27 in opposition to company plans to shift some of its

production capacity to Iran. The industrial action involved several hundred workers who fear that the plans will lead to job losses at Fiat in Italy. Up to 1,000 workers from the Mirafiori plant in Turin supported the strike and marched from the factory to Turin's new Olympic skating arena.

The previous day, Fiat Auto SpA announced that it had signed a deal to manufacture and sell several models in Iran. Production is due to start in the Middle East country in the latter half of this year and Fiat said that capacity in Iran should eventually reach 250,000 vehicles a year.

Fiat has also announced some temporary factory closures at the Mirafiori plant this month, which has led to speculation that the plant is being deliberately run down by the company.

Glasgow Airport fire fighters hold strike action

On January 29, fire fighters at Glasgow Airport began indefinite strike action to protest management proposals over changes to safety arrangements. Staff are concerned that the planned reforms would put airport staff and passengers at risk and compromise safety.

The workers are members of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). The TGWU said that 56 of its 59 members walked off the job to oppose the plans.

Airport operator BAA plans to replace its current fire engine service with a "fire safety and prevention team". The company said that the plans are originally from the Civil Aviation Authority and claims that monies saved will be reinvested into safety.

The union stated that under the proposed changes response times would increase from 2 to 14 minutes and eventually lead to the loss of the fire fighting service at Glasgow Airport.

Fire Brigades Union spokesman John McDonald said: "These firefighters are rightly highlighting BAA's dangerous proposals to remove this vital appliance, without putting adequate provisions in its place. As ever, we see firefighters putting the safety of the public first. We hope that BAA does the same and that both sides reach an appropriate and safe resolution to this dispute."

Management at the airport has defended the plans of the

BAA. Stephen Baxter, managing director of Glasgow Airport, said, “BAA has robust contingency plans, approved by the Civil Aviation Authority, to ensure that the airport continues to operate safely and normally, with a fully-trained, professional fire service in place.”

The conciliation service Acas has also been involved in the conflict and has failed to resolve the dispute between the parties.

Middle East

Iraqi leather industry workers organise sit-in

Workers at the General Company of Leather Industry in al-Karada, a suburb in Baghdad, started a sit-in on January 17 in protest of the way the Ministry and administration is handling salaries and allowances. The workforce has accused the administration of corruption.

The strikers’ demands included: replacement of the administration and the accounting and planning managers in particular; identification of those responsible for the company’s losses and debts from the former regime’s era and an end to punishing workers for these debts by stopping their allowances; replacement of those who represent workers before the administration and the holding of new elections; payment of workers’ allowances on dates due.

Various Iraqi cities have recently witnessed a large wave of strikes, including the protest of energy workers in Baghdad, Nasiriyah and Basra, construction workers in Nasiriyah, and petrochemical manufactures in Baghdad.

Israeli port workers threaten strike action

Workers throughout Israel’s sea ports threatened to strike from the evening of February 2, claiming that Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “has done everything he can to bring about this strike,” according to the port workers’ committee.

The workers and the government have held meetings (which included representatives from the treasury, Transportation Ministry, the Histadrut labour federation, the Ports Authority and the port union) in recent weeks over reforms which would split the state-owned ports into separate competing units. But workers have said that if their demands—on pension terms, ownership of port properties, privatisation of the Eilat Port, and the financial standing of each port—were not met, then a strike was likely.

The Chamber of Shipping warned its members that there was a likelihood of sudden strike action at the ports, and many companies have stopped sending goods to Haifa and Ashdod ports in anticipation, and importers have already begun stocking up.

Israeli health workers to protest downsizing

Thirty thousand Clalit Health Services workers across Israel are threatening to strike against a decision to reduce expenses by closing 10 percent of its clinics and labs, and its

school for nursing and x-ray studies.

The head of the Clalit Employees’ Union, Prosper Ben-Hamu, accused management of eliminating nursing and administrative positions without first reaching agreement with the union. Talks stalled at the end of January and external efforts to bridge the gaps failed. Ben-Hamu blamed Clalit CEO Zev Vermbrand for taking “one-sided actions”.

Ben-Hamu instructed workers to begin industrial disruptions such as preventing cleaning staff from entering, not transferring phone calls and mail to management, and not printing referrals for insured members for private medical institutes. Management sought a restraining order from the Tel Aviv Labour Court February 1.

Africa

Zambian teachers continue strike

Secondary school teachers in the Zambian Copperbelt region have been boycotting lessons since the beginning of term, in support of their demand for the payment of housing allowance arrears and a salary upgrade.

At a meeting of the Provincial Council held on January 29, the strikers affirmed their resolve to continue the strike until their demands are met.

Zimbabwe postal workers remain on strike

Postal workers at Zimpost, Zimbabwe, are in their fourth month of industrial action, in a dispute over pay.

Attempts at negotiations have failed, with rumours that the company may be about to dismiss the 3,000 strikers and replace them with casual labour.

Nigerian military school teachers in dispute

Several civilian teachers at the Ojo Military Cantonment in Lagos have been arrested by military police after they attempted to enter the barracks to enforce a work-to-rule in protest of non-payment of allowances.

The work-to-rule action had been called by civilian teachers employed in Airforce, Naval and Army primary and secondary schools nationally in order to demand the payment of 13 months arrears in their allowances. Whilst most of their counterparts nationally have been paid, those in Lagos have not yet received their allowances. Some teachers believe that the funds are being deliberately withheld by the agencies responsible for administering them.

The strike action had paralysed the schools nationwide. The government had hoped that the teachers would return to work in the New Year, but instead the strikers have stepped up their action.



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