

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

Airline, rail and TV workers strike in Italy

On February 11, railway workers held industrial action throughout Italy to demand an improvement in rail safety. The action resulted in the halting of more than half of all scheduled trains nationwide. The state-run railway service announced that approximately 60 percent of trains were cancelled due to the stoppage.

The strike is the second since a January 7 crash that left 17 dead. The head-on collision between a passenger train and a freight train occurred on a single-track line near Bologna. Five rail workers died as a result. Employees are demanding the government spend extra money on improving safety measures.

Earlier the same afternoon, flight attendants employed by Alitalia airlines took strike action for four hours, resulting in the cancellations of some 141 flights. Most of the cancelled flights were to international destinations. Rome's Fiumicino airport and Linate and Malpensa airports in Milan were the hardest hit by the action.

The stoppage was called by the Sult trade union which represents about 30 percent of Alitalia's 4,000 flight attendants. They were joined by ground crews at airports nationwide who also held a four-hour strike. The action led to a number of delays and cancellations of other airlines' flights. The airline workers are demanding an improvement in their contracts.

One day earlier, TV workers employed by state broadcaster RAI began strike action and forced the postponement of the men's giant slalom at the Alpine skiing world championships in Bormio. The RAI staff are demanding improvements in their work contracts.

Isochem workers at Toulouse, France strike to protest factory closure

Pharmaceutical workers at the Toulouse site of the chemical company Isochem held industrial action on February 9. Employees blocked the entrance to the factory for most of the day.

Management recently met to discuss the future of two branches of Isochem and workers fear that 103 of the 180 jobs at the Toulouse site could be lost.

Staff at three UK museums in dispute

Staff employed at three museums in the UK walked off the job on February 14 in a dispute over pay and cost-cutting measures.

The workers struck for 24 hours at the Science Museum in London, the National Railway Museum in York and the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford.

The industrial action was timed to coincide with the school half-term holidays, normally one of the busiest periods of the year for museums.

The staff are employed by the National Museum of Science and Industry (NMSI), which run the museums. Museum staff rejected a 2.5 percent pay offer, which was below the rate of inflation. Following this the Public and Commercial Services Union and the Prospect trade union balloted staff for industrial action. The NMSI said that they would not increase the pay offer.

Health workers in Warsaw, Poland, begin hunger strike protest

On February 14, six health workers began a hunger strike in Warsaw to protest a new healthcare restructuring bill. Healthcare workers are opposed to the legislation, fearing it will result in hospitals being forced into bankruptcy, job losses and eventual privatisation.

Health unions have stated that if the legislation is passed in the Sejm (National Assembly), it will lead to nationwide strike action.

Middle East

Strike held in sympathy with Jerusalem hospital retirees

On February 15, the Histadrut labour federation called a one-hour strike at hospitals and medical clinics around Israel in solidarity with the 250 pensioners of Bikur Holim Hospital in Jerusalem, who have not received their pension allowances for several months.

The strike is the first in a series of planned protests against the failure to pay the pensions of 250 retired workers of Bikur Holim Hospital. The workers have not received their pension allowances for several months.

Bikur Holim retirees demonstrated near the hospital building. Factory workers and Histadrut activists also joined the protest.

The veterans' hospital has been in receivership for the past year and a half, after 21 department directors asked the court to dismantle the Bikur Holim Hospital association, which operated the hospital. Management was handed over to an official receiver, attorney Shlomo Shahar, but subsequent efforts to sell the hospital have failed.

Hospital workers and retirees who found themselves without a pension appealed to the Knesset Finance Committee, which approved a transfer of NIS 650,000 a month to the hospital for purposes of paying pensions until December 2004. Bikur Holim

announced last week that it will cease the payment of pensions to retirees due to a halt in transfers from the treasury.

Migrant workers in UAE strike over unpaid wages and arrests

Police detained three workers February 14, at a contracting company in the United Arab Emirates capital, Abu Dhabi, and charged them with instigating a strike.

The Pakistani and two Indian workers are among 1,300 men owed as much as 16 months wages by the Road and General Contracting Projects (Rapco) company.

Sources at the workers' main housing compound said that four men were detained late on February 13 (one was later released) for trying to form a union. The men are due to be deported.

Protesting against the arrest, workers at Rapco's camp in Mafraa stopped work. They resumed work after the company's officials assured them that their arrested colleagues will receive all their pending dues before they leave the country.

The newspaper *Khaleej Times* had earlier brought to light the problem of over 1,300 labourers who are owed salaries from the defunct company.

The Red Crescent Authority has since delivered basic foodstuffs to the workers' accommodation after many of them complained that their families in India and Pakistan were begging on the streets.

Africa

Health strike enters second month in DRC

Health workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo have been on strike for over a month, to force the government to pay them a "risk bonus" similar to that given to doctors in late 2004. The strike by nurses, administrative staff and technicians began on January 10.

The government has promised to allocate seven billion Congolese francs (\$US16 million) for the almost 12,000 health workers in the capital to end the strike. A spokesman for the nurses' union Solisco said that health ministry officials and labour unions were currently engaged in "final discussions" on how to distribute the allocated money.

Local government workers and teachers on strike in Zambia

Local government workers in Lusaka and the Copperbelt region of Zambia went on strike on February 8, to demand that the government puts aside K100 billion (\$US2.3 million) of its 2005 national budget for local authorities.

According to the *Times of Zambia*, work at the Ndola City Council has been stopped by the strike, which involves over 800 unionised employees. The strikers locked the entrance to the civic centre at 8 a.m. and forced management to leave the premises. The offices of the Fire Brigade, and the departments for revenue collection, public health, and housing and social issues were all closed and there were no burial permits issued at the civic centre.

On the first day of the action nine people were arrested after strikers blocked the road to the cemetery with old car bodies. The nine were released on police bond, having been charged with breach of the peace. The police have taken over the issuance of burial permits.

At Kitwe, Kalulushi, Chingola, Luanshya and Chililabombwe council workers downed tools in support of the strike. Markets

were seriously affected when because garbage lay uncollected on the streets.

Meanwhile on February 14, the provincial council of the Secondary Schools Teachers Union of Zambia (SESTUZ) pledged to continue with its strike, which began in early January, despite recent statements by its chairman, Lyson Mando.

Zambian civil servants are also threatening to go on strike for higher pay, unless the government increases its current offer of an 18 percent raise.

Local government workers and health workers on strike in Kenya

Local government workers in Kisumu, in western Kenya, went on strike February 10 to demand payment of salary arrears, after the council failed to honour a promise to pay Sh28 million (\$US368,000). This would have covered only part of Sh84 million (\$US1.1 million) arrears, which have been outstanding for six months.

The workers had called off a strike last month after extracting assurances from the council. When they tried to withdraw their salaries from the bank they found that their employers had not paid anything into their accounts. The angry workers then marched on the town hall, where they blocked the main entrance for more than two hours.

Spokesman for the strikers, Frederick Odoje, told the *Nation* (Nairobi) that the workers would remain on strike until they were paid.

Meanwhile more than 2,000 health workers, employed by two Kenyan Ministry of Health parastatals took strike action on February 9, to protest a delayed pay rise.

The strikers, including teaching and non-teaching staff at Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) and at the Kenya Medical Training Centre (KMTTC) colleges throughout the country, complained of being left out when the government awarded a pay rise to civil servants last year.

On February 10, strikers based in Nairobi marched to the headquarters of the Ministry of Health chanting "Pesa! Pesa! (money! money!)". Some of the strikers told the *Nation* that they might lose seven months' salary arrears if the pay rise is not given in the current financial year.



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