# 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**

**Water workers in Northern Ireland hold industrial action**

On February 9, some 2,000 water workers in Northern Ireland held a one-day strike to oppose planned reforms to the service that could result in up to 700 job cuts and the introduction of water rate charges.

As part of the stoppage, workers also held public rallies in Belfast and Derry. The strike was called by four unions whose members voted by a majority for industrial action, following a breakdown in talks with the British government.

Unions said that further industrial action would follow if the dispute was not resolved, including a work to rule.

**Staff at three museums in England to strike**

Staff at three museums in the UK are to take industrial action from February 14 over pay. Workers voted to take strike action after agreed changes to pay had not been implemented. The strike involves workers at the London Science Museum, the National Railway Museum in York and the National Museum of Photography Film and Television, Bradford, and is dated to coincide with the busy school half-term holidays.

The strike ballot was called by the Prospect and the Public and Commercial Services unions after workers voted to reject a below inflation pay offer of 2.5 percent. The action will involve curators, conservators, technical staff, warders, security and administrative workers and managers.

Prospect negotiator Emily Boase said of the dispute, “Previous below-par pay settlements were agreed on the basis that there would be ‘jam tomorrow’. But not only does this award amount to a pay cut for our members, the museum is now saying that it has insufficient funds to implement agreed improvements to the pay and grading structure. These changes have already been paid for by job losses and restructuring.”

**French power workers protest attack on health insurance**

On February 8 the Eléctricitée de France (EDF) and Gaz de France (GDF) power workers struck against changes to their health assurance scheme. Workers fear that the companies involved in the scheme are to be opened up for privatisation.

Fees for the scheme are to be raised in order that the companies present a more investor-attractive balance sheet when they are floated on the stock market. The GDF and the nuclear group Areva are to be floated in summer and the EDF at the end of the year.

Further industrial action is to take place over the coming weeks.

**French naval company staff hold 24-hour strike**

On February 3 staff at the Corse Public Naval Company (SNCM) held a 24-hour strike to denounce efforts to raise private finance in the company and a swathe of job losses.

The Corse administration and the SNCM management announced that the society had a deficit of 28 million euros in 2004 and that they are looking for a private partner. They also announced the cutting of 210 jobs.

**Middle East**

**Flights grounded as Lebanese air traffic controllers strike**

Up to 10 flights were affected during a six-hour strike held by air traffic controllers (ATC) on February 7 at Beirut’s International Airport. Since December 2003, Lebanese air traffic controllers have been demanding a wage increase and some form of job security. There are around 50 air traffic controllers employed at Beirut International Airport.

According to one controller who wished to remain anonymous, the strike affected “more than 20 flights scheduled between departures and landing.” He added, “We sent a note three days ago to airline companies scheduled to arrive or leave Beirut warning them of the strike, and most of the flights were either cancelled or rescheduled.”

Controllers say that they work night shifts, on public holidays and generally exceed the hours of most other civil servants, but are not paid accordingly.

**Health workers in Israel stage solidarity strike**

The Histadrut labour federation authorised a one-hour solidarity warning strike of Israel’s healthcare system on February 9. It followed the announcement by the administration of Jerusalem’s Bikur Holim Hospital that the financially ailing facility is unable to make pension payments to over 200 former employees.

Further action is under discussion.

**Africa**

**Ugandan road workers in sit-down strike**

Employees of the China Changquing international construction company, who are building a road between Pakwach and Olwiyo in Uganda, held a sit-down strike on February 2, to win an improvement in their pay and conditions. More than 100 workers, most of them drivers, said they were unhappy with their pay of sh1,500 ($US0.88) per day, especially since they work more than 12 hours daily.

“We are tired of discrimination. Grader operators get between sh12,000 and sh15,000 [between $ US7.05 and $8.82] per day,” a

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truck driver told the Kampala-based *New Vision* newspaper. “This is a danger zone where one of us can step on a landmine anytime, but they do not even pay us risk allowance.”

Unlike some workers at other companies, those employed by Changquing do not get allowances for food, medicines or rent. Their anger increased at the late payment of their January salaries, after they had worked through the Christmas season without any extra pay. One driver commented bitterly about their employers, “They told us they were not Christians and that they did not know Christmas or Sunday.”

**Zambian teachers stay on strike**

Striking teachers at secondary schools in the Zambian Copperbelt are defying calls by their union’s national leadership to end their dispute, and have called for the negotiations on their salaries to be suspended.

At a meeting of the Secondary Schools Teachers’ Union of Zambia (SESTUZ) in the Copperbelt region, the teachers took a vote of no confidence in the union’s National Executive Committee, and called for an extraordinary conference to replace it.

Meanwhile, after a meeting in Luapula Province, SESTUZ secretary Julius Chabala announced that teachers in Luapula have joined the strike.

The strikers were angered recently when Finance Minister Ng’andu Magande declared the action to be illegal and described teachers as “undisciplined”. Cosmas Mukuka, general secretary of the Basic Education Teachers’ Union of Zambia, demanded a public apology from the minister and added that the remarks had fuelled strikes in other districts.

**South African textile workers strike over pay**

Monthly-paid workers at Frame Textiles in South Africa have been on strike since February 3, in support of their demand for a 7 percent rise for all employees. Pay negotiations broke down after management offered only four percent. The Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers’ Union (Sactwu) has said that 527 workers are involved in the dispute, at three factories in the KwaZulu-Natal.

At the start of the negotiations in October 2004, Sactwu had demanded 11 percent, and management had offered 1.5 percent. Sifiso Makhaye, the Sactwu regional secretary for KwaZulu-Natal, said the strike would carry on until the management returned to negotiations.

South Africa’s textile industry has been hit hard by a strong “home” currency and by the import of cheap textiles from China.

**Public sector strike in Burkina Faso**

Sixty thousand public sector workers downed tools on February 4 in a 24-hour “warning” strike called by six national trade unions and 12 independent unions. The action was in support of a programme of demands including a 25 percent rise in wages and pensions, tax cuts, especially on fuel products, and the prompt reconstruction of Ouagadougou’s central market that was burnt down in 2003.

On the day of the strike, 5,000 demonstrators brought Ouagadougou to a halt when they marched through the streets of the capital city.

Last December, in an attempt to settle the dispute, the government announced a series of wage increases (ranging from 4.5 to 8 percent) for the New Year. The unions rejected them as inadequate to meet the rapidly increasing cost of living.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions has expressed its support for the strike.

**Zambian glass workers’ wives demand justice for their husbands**

On February 2, more than 100 wives of former employees of Kapiri Glass Product (KGP), in Kapiri Mposhi, central Zambia, marched with their husbands through the civic centre.

The women, some of them with babies strapped on their backs, were demanding that the government pay their husbands’ termination benefits after the closure of the KGP factory. Their action was sparked off by the eviction of six families by their landlords.

The protesting women marched to a meeting of the Liquor Licensing Board, which was being opened by Central Province Permanent Secretary Richard Salivaji. They forced Salivaji to speak to them before the meeting started. He attempted to reassure them by telling them that government was already looking into the issues, but added that the situation was complicated by the fact that KGP had gone through many hands before it was closed down.

At the same time as the KGP demonstration was taking place, armed police were dispersing unionised Kapiri Mposhi council workers who were demanding six months’ salary arrears.

According to the *Times of Zambia*, the council workers had mobilised themselves early in the morning, without the knowledge of the local officials of the Zambia United Local Authority Workers Union, and had gathered at the civic centre with the intention of disrupting the Liquor Licensing Board meeting.

**Nigerian doctors close to renewing strike over arrears**

Resident doctors in Nigeria have threatened to renew their strike from February 10, after government promises to pay their six months’ salary arrears had failed to materialise. The doctors returned to work in late January, after a seven-week strike after the federal government announced the release of funds to clear the arrears. However, the government has not kept to its promise.

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