

Workers Struggles: Europe & 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

Belgium brewery workers strike

Workers at the Belgium brewer InBev went on strike March 16 at its Louvain, Jupille and Anderlecht plants.

The industrial action by members of the FGTB/ABVV union effectively shut down operations and was condemned by the management of Interbrew, the Belgium branch of InBev.

The brewery workers are demanding an increase in wages. Workers in other food and drink companies were also involved in strike action earlier in the week.

Cypriot miners protest over unpaid wages

Around 50 copper miners from the Skouriotissa mine gathered outside the Archbishopric March 8, in protest at not being paid for the past three months. Hellenic Copper Mines Ltd, in which the Orthodox Church holds a large stake, faces a large lawsuit by angry employees, who claim they are owed approximately £165,000 in back salaries.

The company is owned by the Hellenic Mining Corporation (EME) and Mytilineos SA. The Archbishopric owns 41 percent of shares and Mytilineos 26.69 percent. The Archbishopric's stake is split between EME and the Hellenic Bank.

In addition to owing salaries, £324,000 has gone missing from the provident fund. Employees claim the cash-strapped company is paying its debts using money from the fund.

One of the protesting miners told the *Cyprus Mail*, "It was only in November last year that we received our August salary. Even worse is the fact that we were paid nothing over the Christmas period. It's meant to be a religious time so the church should have helped us out, even with a symbolic gesture, such as providing us with some food. We spent the entire holidays without any money."

Another miner outside the Archbishopric said, "Last year, 15 miners at Skouriotissa were made redundant, with the company citing downsizing as the reason. These miners still haven't received their full redundancy packages."

Striking French sailors block English Channel traffic

French seamen at the port of Calais carried out a three-day protest from March 21 that blocked rail and ferry services across the English Channel.

The industrial action is in response to discussions in the French parliament on changes to shipping laws that make it easier for foreign ships to register under the French flag. The seamen say this will mean cuts in jobs and wages.

On March 21, the first day of action, rail traffic was blocked for three hours after a group of about 100 striking workers cut through fences surrounding the terminal near Calais and invaded the tracks. Trains were stopped in both directions, with 15 Eurostar services delayed.

Riot police intervened with teargas on March 22 to clear the entrance to the Eurotunnel rail terminal, but the ferry port remained out of action until mid-afternoon. One protesting seaman was injured in scuffles with police and another was detained for allegedly throwing stones.

The strikers also blockaded berths at the Port of Calais, resulting in delays for SeaFrance and P&O ferry services.

Ferry operator SeaFrance had already cancelled its Dover-Calais services because of the strike. P&O has also been affected, with two ferries returning to Kent because they were unable to berth in Calais.

One-day stoppage throughout Greece

Workers across Greece began a 24-hour strike on March 17 against rising unemployment and high inflation. The protest brought the Athens transport system grinding to a halt, as well as those in many other parts of the country.

Teachers, bank employees, railway staff and postal workers were just some of those taking part in the stoppage. Olympic Airline cancelled most of its flights as stewards and baggage handlers joined the stoppage.

Some banks remained closed as striking bank employees stood outside entrances, preventing colleagues and customers from entering. Post office and construction workers stayed away from work as well.

Staff of the Hellenic Railway Organization (OSE), state hospitals, banks, post offices and some utilities also staged a 24-hour strike; civil servants and hospital doctors took part in a four-hour work stoppage. Similar actions were held by the journalists' associations as well as elementary and high school teachers, while universities and archaeological sites remained closed.

Riot police used tear gas to break up a demonstration by students outside the Foreign Ministry in central Athens. No injuries were reported. Another two demonstrations numbering some 9,000 people wound through the city centre, which was gridlocked due to the strike.

The industrial action is the most serious challenge to the conservative New Democracy Party government since it was elected a year ago. It comes after the government warned of austerity measures driven by its efforts to control the budget deficit, which is already above limits set by the European Union.

Unemployment in Greece is running at more than 10 percent, and official statistics reveal that almost one-third of the population subsist below the poverty line.

City council workers in Ireland take unofficial strike action

Up to 100 city council workers in Waterford, Republic of Ireland are engaged in unofficial industrial action over the council's use of outside contract staff. Wheelie-bin collections, road-works and waterworks are affected as a result of the dispute.

The March 23 action came after 50 staff staged a sit-in at the city's Bolton Street depot the day before.

Management issued a letter to staff to return to work without delay, stating that failure to do so would be considered gross misconduct in

breach of the city council's grievance and disciplinary procedures.

Italian cabin crew launch strike

Strike action by Alitalia cabin crews March 16 has caused major disruption and the cancellation of dozens of flights from Rome and Milan.

The company has been forced to cancel at least 118 flights—including 54 domestic flights and 32 international flights.

The 24-hour strike was called by the flight attendants union SULT to press for contract renewal. Workers have been worried about the airline's restructuring plans, which include cutting some 3,700 jobs and separating its ground-service operations from its flight business. Workers are also demanding better pay for cabin crews. It is the third strike since February.

The union has rejected salary cuts and job losses accepted by larger unions as part of an attempt to save Alitalia from bankruptcy.

Italian rail strike planned

Italian railway workers pressing for improved safety measure have called an eight-hour strike from this week. The strike originally had been scheduled to last for 24 hours, but was reduced after appeals from authorities.

The rail strike is the latest by workers who want the government to spend more on rail safety following a January 7 crash in northern Italy that left 17 dead. Five rail workers were among the victims of the head-on collision between a passenger train and a freight train in thick fog near Bologna.

Africa

South African miners begin strike

About 20,000 gold miners began strike action March 24 protesting 4,900 threatened job cuts at Harmony mine in the Free State, South Africa. Talks between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and management at South Africa's Council for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration failed to resolve the dispute, which also includes a demand for larger housing allowances.

A second union with members in the Harmony mines, Solidarity, has given notice that it will also begin strike action March 28. Harmony cut 8,000 jobs and closed five mine shafts last year.

The South African mining industry has seen profits fall since 2001 as the South African currency, the rand, has more than doubled against the dollar. Most costs are paid in rands while exports are paid in dollars. Harmony is hoping to take over Gold Fields as the industry attempts to regain its profitability.

The NUM is claiming more housing allowance for workers who don't live at the mine compound and better living conditions for those that do. Some mining hostels have no running water, with as many as eight miners to a room. The minimum wage for underground mine workers is R2,354 (\$US381) a month.

Fun park strike in South Africa

Some 300 workers have begun strike action at the Gold Reef City theme park in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The strikers, members of the South African Commercial Catering & Allied Workers' Union (Saccawu), are demanding a 12.68 percent pay increase. They are also demanding study loans, a bursary scheme and free transport for employees to the funerals of colleagues. The union has alleged that Gold Reef's management are hiring 15-year-old school children as casual labor.

Egyptian textile workers oppose privatization

Workers from Esco's Qalyoub textile mill, 15 kilometres north of Cairo, staged a sit-in at the headquarters of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) last weekend. Some 400 workers have been on

strike for over a month protesting the government's sale of the mill to a private owner. They are demanding either to stay in the public sector to keep their jobs and social security benefits or to be given an adequate early retirement package.

The GFTU is a government-controlled body and strikes are illegal unless sanctioned by this union. Esco are refusing to pay the strikers as the GFTU did not authorize the strike. In practice it is very difficult to get GFTU recognition as it requires a two-thirds majority vote in favour and an announcement of the duration of the strike beforehand.

The delegation of 50 workers met GFTU General Secretary Said El-Gohari, who was accompanied by two state security officers. El-Gohari told the workers that their strike was illegal and he refused to represent them as they failed to go through official channels. "You are taking on the government," he said, "I'm in no position to help you."

Stay-at-home protest in Niger

A stay-at-home protest in Niger's capital Niamey closed down public transport and shops for a day in opposition to a government imposition of 19 percent Value Added Tax (VAT). The tax was imposed in January on everyday items including flour, milk and sugar, as well as on water and electricity.

About 20,000 protesters marched through the capital the previous week, but when the government refused to grant permission for a second march the stay-at-home was organized instead. The protests are organized by about 30 groups in a "coalition against costly living," including trade unions and human rights organizations and consumer groups.

Niger ranks second from bottom on the UN Human Development Index, with more than 60 percent of the 11 million population living on less than a dollar a day. Only 20 percent of Niger's inhabitants have proper sanitation and only 40 percent have access to clean drinking water, according to UN estimates. Some 3 million people are at risk of famine this year, as last year's harvest was hit by poor rain and locusts. The UN World Food Programme appealed for \$US10 million to import food, to make up for a deficit of nearly a quarter of a million tonnes of cereal this year.

The government refused to back down over the VAT increases, saying it was in line with guidelines issued by the West African Economic and Monetary Union, an International Monetary Fund-backed regional body that implements free market investment and trade policies.



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