

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Europe

Polish miners continue underground strike protest

According to United Press International on January 4, around 150 striking coal miners in southern Poland's Silesia region entered the mines to join 12 colleagues in an underground protest. Polish radio reported union leaders as saying that the miners decided to continue their strike underground to highlight their demands. Miners at the state-controlled Budryk coal mine in the Silesia region went on strike in mid-December demanding equal salaries with those employed at the Jastrzebska coal mine, scheduled to incorporate the Budryk operation later this year. Management maintains this is not feasible because Budryk coal production is lower than that of the Jastrzebska mine.

The Jastrzebska mine is part of the state-run Weglowa Co. mines, Europe's largest coal producer, which employs more than 63,000 workers in 16 coal mines.

UK teachers set for strike ballot over pay

Britain's biggest teachers' union, the National Union of Teachers, has said it will ballot its members on strike action if a below inflation-level pay rise is enacted by the government.

The move threatens the first national strike by teachers for more than two decades in response to Prime Minister Gordon Brown's imposition of a public sector pay rise. In line with this, ministers are set to announce a pay rise of just 2 percent this month under conditions in which the cost of living has risen by an average of 4 percent this year.

UK customs workers to vote on industrial action

In protest at job cuts and office closures, thousands of Revenue and Customs workers are to start voting on whether to stage a one-day strike and a ban on overtime.

The walkout is to be held on January 31, the deadline for self-assessment tax returns, if there is a "yes" vote by members of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS).

The union has accused the government department of "ploughing on" with closures and job losses despite deteriorating services and problems such as the recent loss of discs containing the personal details of 25 million people.

Up to 250 offices are slated for closure and 25,000 jobs under threat by 2011, with remaining staff having to work overtime or see consultants hired to mask the impact of the cuts, said the union.

The strike ballot closes on January 23.

Greece: dock workers strike over privatisation

According to Reuters, Greek dockers staged a 24-hour strike on January 7 that stopped ships loading and unloading, in protest against government plans to privatise the country's largest commercial ports. Cargo ships will dock at the ports, but will not be allowed to load or unload. The backlog of containers is expected to lead to disruptions in distribution.

George Nohoutidis, head of Piraeus port employees union, said, "Cargo ships will have to find alternative ports to dock, probably other Mediterranean ports. Merchants will not receive goods on time and these delays will certainly affect the market."

The Greek government has said it plans to sell off stakes in its major ports to strategic investors to bolster port investment, develop container business and make Greece a "regional shipping hub."

Employees at state-controlled Piraeus (OLP) and Thessaloniki ports plan to continue with more strikes in coming weeks, the unions said.

The Piraeus and Thessaloniki ports have a current market value of €769.50 million and €370.94 million, respectively.

Turkey: Tobacco workers protest privatisation plans

On January 9, some 60 workers from the Cevizli factory of TEKEL—the state-owned tobacco company, which is on the verge of privatisation—protested the governing Justice and Development Party's (AKP's) privatisation plans. Workers, who gathered in front of the AKP building in Istanbul, initially wanted to talk to local party leaders.

TEKEL workers were stopped by the police and prevented from proceeding further. The workers then began a sit-in protest in front of the building. They also shouted slogans such as "Factories are our strongholds, we will not surrender them," "We will not let you sell off state-owned companies" and "Barricade against the IMF, not against workers."

Yunus Durdu, branch leader of Tek Gida-Is (Union of Tobacco, Alcoholic Beverage, Food and Related Industry Workers of Turkey), made a speech on behalf of the group, saying, "Notwithstanding the government's claims that TEKEL is a loss-making company, this year the company managed to realise a profit of \$4.1 billion, and this money directly went into the coffers of the state." Durdu said that TEKEL workers will not submit to the privatisation policies of the government: "Today we are here, tomorrow we will organise resistance actions in other places. We will not stop until TEKEL is taken out of the scope of privatisation."

Meanwhile, protesters chained themselves to the barriers in front of the AKP building. Police cut the chains by using bolt cutters and brutally detained 21 workers, at one point used tear gas against the group. Later on, workers managed to free their detained fellow workers by gathering around the bus carrying them.

Up to now, the central leadership of the union has limited itself to issuing statements full of chauvinism and organising ineffective, token actions with regard to the privatisation of TEKEL. However, under the pressure of the members, branch leaders are time to time forced to act, and this protest was one example.

In contrast to the tobacco markets in western Europe and the US, the Turkish tobacco market is growing very rapidly, and the cheap labour force makes TEKEL an attractive investment for the transnational monopolies.

Spanish abortion clinics on strike

Staff at the private clinics that carry out over 90 percent of legal abortions in Spain began a weeklong strike January 8, calling for changes to the law. Clinic employees say women patients and doctors should have better legal protection. Police raided abortion clinics in Barcelona and Madrid late last year.

Most abortions in Spain are carried out under a law requiring a doctor's diagnosis that the pregnancy poses a risk to the woman's mental health. The strike is expected to affect up to 2,000 women.

According to the BBC, Spanish doctors want the law changed in line with many other European countries, where a woman can legally choose to have a termination within the first three months of pregnancy. Presently in Spain, the doctor's judgment can be challenged by the authorities. In recent months, more than a dozen medical staff have been arrested on suspicion of carrying out illegal abortions.

Dr. Roland Ledea, who runs a private abortion clinic in Madrid, told that BBC, "We are now in 2008 and the law was made in 1985—society has changed a lot. I think abortion should be free, depending on the woman that is pregnant, nothing else."

Abortions can be performed in Spain within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy in cases of rape and within 22 weeks in cases of foetal malformation. The Roman Catholic Church, which still wields much power over Spanish society, opposes any termination of a pregnancy.

Belgian Opel workers take wildcat strike action

According to flandersnews.be, a wildcat strike broke out amongst workers at the Opel car plant in Antwerp January 8. Workers on the morning shift refused to go back to work after their mid-morning break, complaining that their wages had not been paid out correctly.

Irregularities in wages and payment have been a point of contention at Opel for the past three years. Around 3,500 people work at Opel, Antwerp, and it is reported that workers have said they will only resume their jobs when management promises to act on their complaints.

Walkout at Finnish packaging plants

Hundreds of workers at the two Walki packaging plants in Pietarsaari and Valkeakoski walked off the job January 9, in protest at planned redundancies. At Pietarsaari, 214 workers stopped work, and another 194 walked off in Valkeakoski. According to YLE News, Walki said on January 8 that it will begin talks next week aimed at cutting 150 jobs across all Finnish company divisions. Walki is a leading European producer of wrappings and composite materials for industrial applications. In addition to Finland, Walki has factories in Sweden, Germany, England and China. The company employs around 600 people in Finland. Walki's white-collar workers said they would stay off the job for 24 hours, whereas other employees will not return for two days. Walki, formerly a subsidiary of UPM, was sold to investment group CapMan in 2007.

Middle East

Histadrut calls official dispute in religious councils

An official dispute has been initiated by the Histadrut Union Federation—triggering a two-week process to industrial action—after religious council workers complained of prolonged wage delays.

Various religious services, including burial services, may be halted in some 137 municipalities across Israel. The Israeli Clerical Union announced January 8 that the religious councils are considering suspending the burial services unless their workers' wages are paid immediately.

According to Histadrut, workers in 40 religious councils have not been paid for six months.

Histadrut had called on the prime minister's office (PMO) to allocate the US\$4.6 million needed in order to pay the religious councils' workers wages immediately, but the PMO claims the wage delay originated in the municipalities and that it is up to them to find a solution for the problem.

Longest lecturers' strike in Israeli university history still unresolved

On January 8, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that the Senior Lecturers Union (SLU) had rejected National Labour Court President Steve Adler's proposal to end their strike.

According to Adler's proposal, which he presented to the parties late Sunday night, the rate of salary erosion would be determined by an

outside arbitrator. This has been agreed to by the Finance Ministry. If the erosion since 2001 was found to be higher than 16 percent, the lecturers would receive a 21 percent raise, and if it was found to be lower, the lecturers would receive an immediate 11 percent bonus, but no more.

The presidents of the universities have said that this coming Sunday would be the last possible day to salvage the fall semester. On January 3, the strike by University faculty members over pay became the longest in Israeli university history. At press time, the strike had entered its 80th day.

Africa

Chambishi copper smelter workers' strike action

Around 500 construction workers, working at the Chambishi Copper Smelter, went out on strike January 3 to demand improved pay and conditions of service.

The smelter is owned by Non-Ferrous Metals of China, which has invested US\$200 million in the smelter as part of China's planned US\$900 million investment in the small town. The Zambian government has created a tax-free "economic zone" in Chambishi, to attract investment from China. Production is expected to begin in August.

The workers accused the joint Chinese-Zambian management of lack of sensitivity and of intimidating them when they raise complaints.

The workers' spokesperson, Lesswell Malume, said, "Our conditions of service are simply pathetic, but when we complain we are told to stop work and look for employment elsewhere. We are getting salaries as low as K200,000 [US\$52] and K300,000 [US\$79] per month."

Another striker said that there was too much victimisation at the company and that the managers had no regard for the workers.

The workers returned to work January 8. Albert Mando, general secretary of the National Union of Mining and Allied Workers, which is trying to unionise the workers, stated, "The strike has ended but we are not sure if they have struck a deal."

Copper production is the main industry in Zambia. The action by the smelting workers is part of a strike wave in the industrial copper-belt region.

Baggage handlers on strike in Lagos, Nigeria

Airport workers employed by the National Aviation Handling Company (NAHCO) at the Murtala Mohammed Airport, Lagos, took wildcat strike action on January 8. It followed the failure of the NAHCO management to come up with an acceptable new welfare package due to be brought in by the end of January.

The workers, members of the Air Transport Service Senior Association (ATSSSAN), have been in a prolonged dispute with NAHCO management. They struck in defiance of the union leadership, which had tried to persuade the workers to give management a two-week ultimatum of strike action if they did not offer a suitable pay and service package.

Those on strike gathered outside the company headquarters, chanting and singing protest songs. They demanded the removal of Bates Sule, NAHCO's managing director.

The majority of those employed by NAHCO are contractors, who earn an average of N22,788 (US\$193) a month before tax and other deductions. According to the baggage-handling workers, NAHCO makes N500 million (US\$4.2 million) a month servicing around 30 air carriers, many of which are foreign airlines.

Nigerian doctors on strike over salary structure

Doctors in Kogi state, Nigeria, began strike action January 3 over an agreement for a harmonised health workers salary structure (HATISS), which has only been partially implemented. They have suspended the action for 30 days for further negotiation.

The state government has offered a 50 percent partial implementation of the HATISS pay and conditions agreement. Dr. Joseph Iduh, chairman of the Kogi state chapter of the Nigeria Medical Association (NMA), said in response to the offer, "If the state government is willing, we are willing to negotiate further, for us to improve on this proposal, 50 percent is not

acceptable to doctors. We want 100 percent.”



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