

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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Europe

German public sector strike

Striking German civil servants held rallies on February 19 to press for higher wages amid a growing tax evasion scandal. All German states were affected by the protest, with the exception of the northern city-state of Hamburg and Saxony in eastern Germany, a spokesman told AFP.

Those involved in the protests included cleaning workers; staff in local town halls, savings banks, and daycare centres; and armed forces personnel.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, an estimated 16,000 civil servants participated in the strikes. A banner in the protests in the western city of Dortmund read, "We need at least 8 percent because we also want to invest in Liechtenstein," referring to alleged cases of massive tax fraud centred on the European principality.

The industrial actions began February 15, to press demands for an 8 percent pay rise, or a minimum increase of €200 (US\$290) for 1.3 million federal and municipal workers. Officials have proposed only a 5 percent increase over two years, along with an extension of the workweek from 38.5 hours to 40 hours.

Germany: Pay rise follows strike by 85,000 steel workers

The AFP news agency reported that the German trade union IG Metall and steel companies agreed February 19 to a 5.2 percent pay rise for steel workers. The increase is to take effect on March 1 and remain valid until March 31, 2009, the union said.

Following industrial action by around 85,000 steel workers in three northwestern German regions, they are to receive a bonus of €200 (US\$290) under terms of the agreement. Oliver Burkhard, the lead union negotiator from IG Metall claimed that "It's the best result in 15 years." But the union had initially demanded an 8 percent pay rise for the steel workers, saying staff deserved a share of the recent success of firms such as ThyssenKrupp and Salzgitter.

According to Reuters, under the deal, reached after 10 hours of talks, the 85,000 workers in the northwest will receive the rise from March, as well as a one-off payment of €200 in February. Employers had first offered 3.5 percent, with a contract duration of at least 16 months. The current deal has a duration of 13 months.

Helmut Koch, who negotiated for employers, said, "We agreed to this wage deal because of the concrete threat of strikes."

German steel workers had already staged temporary stoppages in support of the pay demands, and union officials had said if no deal were reached, IG Metall would aim to stage full-scale strikes in Germany from late February or early March.

Ground staff strike grounds 146 flights at Milan's airports

According reports February 19, around 146 flights at Milan's airports in were cancelled that day when ground staff went on strike to protest against Alitalia's plans to scale back its operations in northern Italy.

Airport sources said 102 flights were cancelled at Malpensa airport, one of Alitalia's two hubs, and 44 at Linate, Milan's smaller airport, during the four-hour stoppage. Thousands of demonstrators also gathered outside

Malpensa on February 17 to protest against the "scale-back plan."

Alitalia is in financial trouble and is currently in talks to be bought by Air France-KLM. It plans to cut its flights from Malpensa to 105 a day from 360 from April 1, downgrading the airport's hub status in favour of Rome. The Italian state is planning to sell its 49.9 percent stake in Alitalia, but, according to Reuters, last month's collapse of Prime Minister Romano Prodi's centre-left government raises questions over whether an agreement can now be sealed.

Polish nurses continue protest over pay

Nurses from the hospital in Bilgoraj, in southeast Poland, began an all-day sit-in strike in the hospital director's office on February 14. They have since said that their protest will extend to the town magistrate's office.

The nurses are demanding a pay rise of 500-600 zlotys a month. The head of the Nurses and Midwives' Trade Union at the hospital, Beata Szarnowska, has told Radio Lublin that the protesting nurses want their local councillors to pass a resolution to guarantee their salary increase.

The prefect of Bilgoraj, Marek Onyszkiewicz, told the press that the magistrate could only guarantee a loan for the purchase of new equipment, not the nurses' salaries.

Polish coal miners protest as company breaks agreement

Polskieradio reported this week that the management of Jastrzebska Spółka Węglowa, the owner of the Budryk colliery, which has seen strike action by miners since mid-December, has sent a letter to the media denying that it has breached any arrangements made with the Budryk colliery trade union.

Company chairman Jaroslaw Zagórowski said that all contributions and one-off payments promised to the miners in the agreement have been transferred to the colliery employees' bank accounts.

The miners went on hunger strike (above and below ground) for 46 days, ending the protest when they believed they had secured better pay and conditions. Last week, however, miners claimed the management had broken the terms of the agreement and threatened further action.

Strike hits Tesco in Poland

A Tesco supermarket in the Polish city of Tychy had to shut down for two hours February 20, as angry workers held a two-hour warning strike. The workers are demanding a pay increase. Wages at Tesco run from about €220 to €300 a month, and workers are demanding an increase of about €200 a month.

A Tesco executive from England was flown to Tychy during the dispute. The firm hired strikebreakers from a temping agency to replace the cashiers who would be on strike, but the striking employees blocked the entrance of the supermarket.

Tesco eventually had to shut down the store. Many customers were apparently able to leave without paying during the disruption. Union members involved in organising the strike were threatened with disciplinary action. Tesco has labelled the strike as illegal.

Majority of unionised Norwegian workers set to strike to defend pensions

Nearly two thirds of unionised workers, affiliated to Norway's trade union federation LO, have said that they are ready to strike this spring to preserve pension benefits, according to the newspaper *Aftenposten*.

The official retirement age in Norway is 67, but current rules allow most members of labour unions to retire from age 62 without sacrificing pension benefits. Workers can collect their state pension plus a tax-free supplement through the union until they reach age 65.

The government wants Norwegians to work longer. A recent government proposal will reduce benefits for those retiring before age 67. The state is keen to cut pension costs and retain control of the pension funds, even though Norwegians' public pensions are backed by one of the biggest pension funds in the world.

An opinion poll conducted by research firm Respons for *Aftenposten* indicates that 66 percent want current so-called AFP benefits to continue, and they are willing to strike in their defence. Union negotiations start in early March. Strikes could affect all sectors, including public services, hotels and transportation.

Middle East

Protests sweep five Egyptian provinces

Protests against low wages and high prices swept five Egyptian provinces on February 19, according to a report in *Al Masry Al Youm*.

In Gharbia, an estimated 27,000 workers of Mahala Textile Company threatened to go on strike in protest against the government's complicity in price rises and low wages. Workers said their protest was a warning to the government and the leaders of the National Party of the "upcoming revolution of the hungry."

In Menoufia, around 2,300 workers employed by the Andurama Taktil Company in Shebin Al-Kom went on strike against the administration's decision to reduce their share of the profits and pay them on instalments. Union leaders said they would prepare for a general strike in coordination with all community forces if the government did not respond to their demands to raise the minimum wage. In Port Said, workers of the Canal Ropes Company threatened to go on strike to protest against the Suez Canal Authority not meeting its pledges to pay them at the same level as their counterparts in the authority.

Dozens of people also gathered in Port Said, to declare their rejection of the official demand to have them pay extortionate housing costs, even after having had their homes removed.

In Ismailia, lawyers of the Delta Electricity Company threatened to escalate the action in a dispute centred on lack of promotion. In Fayoum, 50 nurses organised a sit-in in protest at their low wages and the bad quality of the hospital canteen meals.

Al Masry Al Youm also reported February 17 that workers at the Giza Authority for Cleaning and Beautification continued their strike for the third consecutive day and staged a sit-in in front of Beshtil Council, Imbaba. They protested against being forced by the authority's president to use dangerous chemical substances to paint sidewalks, which caused dozens of cases of respiratory allergies and renal failures.

Egyptian tunnel workers demonstrate

Around 200 temporary workers from the Azhar tunnel in Egypt demonstrated in Opera Square in Cairo on February 17. They were demanding that the Metro Authority award them permanent contracts. The tunnel links Opera Square with Salah Salem Street, and its construction is under the jurisdiction of the National Authority of Tunnels, which stipulates that after three years any employee should be awarded a permanent contract. Many of those attending the protest had been working in the tunnels for more than four years.

One of the demonstrators told *Daily News* (Egypt), "Most of us are on temporary contracts of six months, and every six months they renew the contracts, but this is illegal.... They used to employ foreign firms who were far more expensive, so now they are using us to save money."

Hani Fathy, 26, who has been working in the tunnels for five years, told

the paper, "It's not just about the money. An appointment gives you rights that every worker should have. These include complete health insurance, social insurance and paid holidays."

Another demonstrator, Sayid Ali Amran, who works in the tunnels' services department, commented, "The Minister of Environment has made several reports on the damaging effects the carbon has on our health. Results showed that it is dangerous to spend more than one hour a day in those tunnels. We spend eight hours a day in them." The president of the authority threatened the demonstrators that they would be dismissed if they did not disperse.

Iraqi power workers sit-in

On February 15, United Press International reported that workers in Iraq's Nasiriyah power station staged a sit-in, demanding the Electricity Ministry do more to help them keep the plant in operation. According to the *Badr* newspaper, workers carried signs during the protest, where they urged the ministry to supply new spare parts and equipment. Abbas Abd Al Hassan Rahi, the chief of the Technicians and Engineers Union, said the plant was nearing collapse because of the lack of resources dedicated by the ministry to repairs and new projects. Rahi praised the workers for keeping the electricity flowing, and said, "After many requests were made to the Electricity Ministry and the authorities in charge that they fulfil their duties, we organised this sit-in."

Iraq's Electricity Ministry is urging foreign companies to bid on contracts to snap up the industry. Minister Karim Waheed Hasan told the *Voices of Iraq* news agency, "The Ministry is about to embark on six projects for the generation of electricity, five in Baghdad and one in al-Maseeb, Bable province.... Iraqi companies are only rehabilitating the power grid, but not rebuilding it." All Iraq's ministries have barely spent a quarter of their allocated capital budget since 2003. The Iraqi Electrical Utility Workers Union has complained the ministry is too reliant on foreigners instead of paying Iraqi workers and companies to fix the infrastructure. Electricity supply has increased since 2003 but is far below national demand. Attacks on infrastructure and workers are common.

Africa

Mozambican sugar workers in wildcat strike

Around 600 seasonal sugar workers from Xinavane sugar plantation in Maputo province, Mozambique, took wildcat strike action on February 15-16 despite opposition from the Sugar Workers Union and the trade union federation, the OTM. The strikers demanded an increase of 108 percent in their monthly wages—from 1,100 to 2,500 meticaïs (from US\$46 to US\$104). They also demanded written contracts and protective clothing.

The strikers are alleged to have attacked the company offices and to have set 20 hectares of sugar cane ablaze. After the arrival of the police, clashes ensued, and 14 people were reported to be injured, four of them seriously.

Agencia de Informacao de Mocambique reported that after the confrontation with the police management agreed to supply protective equipment, pay for working Sundays and other rest days, and to allow a day off in the event of a death in the family. But they refuse to pay any more than the minimum wage of 1,126 meticaïs (US\$47) a month. According to a report on the private television station STV, management has declared that wages will only rise in line with this year's negotiations over the minimum wage.

The majority shareholder in Xinavane is the South African sugar giant Tongaat-Hulett, which made an operating profit of 1.02 billion rand (more than US\$133 million) in 2006.

Nigerian hotel workers picket Lagos Sheraton

Around 500 striking hotel workers brought the Lagos Sheraton Hotel in Nigeria to a standstill on February 19, protesting the management's alleged violations of labour laws. The picket was organised by the Trade Union of Nigeria (TUC).

Chief John Kolawole, secretary general of the TUC, told the demonstrators that the picketing would continue until management “desist from interfering in union activities, all outstanding check-off dues must be remitted to the HAPSSA national body and that management should accord the branch union leaders their due recognition.”

Nigerian oil workers locked out by Total/Elf

More than 2,000 oil workers have been in dispute with Total/Elf over their conditions of service. One of the issues in dispute is the failure of the company to “formalise” their appointments, which would entitle workers to terminal benefits.

The company’s response, on February 15, was to lock the workers out. Fred Ohwawa, Total’s spokesman, claimed that this was necessary “to forestall a breakdown of law and order”.

According to *This Day*, the locked-out workers who were gathered outside the front gate of Total at Trans Amadi, Port Harcourtand, only allowed a few senior officers of the company to go into the complex. The affected workers are members of the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) and Petroleum & Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN).

Nigerian lecturers shut down universities

On February 17, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) declared a one-week warning strike to be observed in all federal universities over the following week. The action was to press for the reinstatement of 49 of its members, who were sacked from the University of Ilorin (UNILORIN) seven years ago.

At a press conference announcing the strike, the president of the ASUU, Dr. Abdullahi Sule-Kano, explained that the lecturers were sacked in 2001 because they participated in national action called by the union. He said the present strike had been called only after all other avenues for resolving the problem had been exhausted.

Dr. Sule-Kano said that the victimised lecturers had taken legal action, and in 2005 the Federal High Court had ruled in their favour, but the government filed an appeal against the ruling. The lecturers have since taken their case all the way to the Supreme Court.

The ASUU leader also said the refusal to reinstate the 49 lecturers has been causing serious problems in the university academically, “because most of them have left a vacuum that could not the filled.” He said the lecturers included 9 professors (2 of whom have since died), 21 PhD holders (one of whom had also died) and 18 non-PhD holders. Another three are critically ill and need immediate medical attention “but are financially crippled.”



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