Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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Greek airline workers protest sell-off

According to an AP report, hundreds of protesting employees of Olympic Airlines (OA) walked onto the main runway of Athens International Airport September 23 in protest at plans to sell the state-owned airline to a private company.

The action by pilots, air stewards, technicians and support staff stopped planes from taking off or landing for around 30 minutes. Airport authorities said flights were diverted to a second runway.

The Greek government has said that OA has accumulated total losses of around €2.7 billion ($3.85 billion). The European Union last week approved a government plan to privatize the Greek carrier next year. OA's 8,100 employees are not guaranteed jobs when the airline is sold, but 4,600 salaried employees will be offered public sector jobs as part of a compensation package.

The latest demonstration is the second such action in a week.

Greek customs strike

September 24 marked the third day of an indefinite strike by customs workers who began rolling 48-hour strikes on September 22, providing only a skeleton staff, to protest a government plan that relinquishes their control over bonus payments.

Trucks and passenger cars lined up on both sides of Greece's border posts with the Republic of Macedonia, Bulgaria and Turkey. Gasoline stations have started running out of supplies.

According to the *International Herald Tribune*, thousands of truck drivers and passengers were stranded at the Evzoni border post between Greece and Macedonia, the state-run Athens News Agency reported Wednesday. The lines stretched for several kilometers.

Only fuel supplies destined for the armed forces, hospitals and public transport were being cleared by customs at the port of Thessaloniki in northern Greece.

German bank workers protest

Staff at Germany's biggest retail bank chain, Postbank, in Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, Dortmund, Leipzig, Ludwigshafen and Munich took industrial action September 22. Further strikes are planned for the company's 5,000 workers. Wage negotiations between Verdi and Postbank are set to continue in their third round this week in Bad Neuenahr.

The union is demanding an 8 percent wage increase and layoff protection until 2013. The measures are meant to stave off job cuts as Deutsche Bank takes over Postbank in the coming months.

Italian tool factory workers strike

According to AGI news, there was an eight-hour strike in the factories of Antonio Merloni in the Italian town of Fabriano (Ancona) September 19, with 3,000 workers and their families involved.

Employees downed tools and demonstrated on the streets of Fabriano in a protest against the risks involved in a restructuring plan by the multinational group, which makes household electric products. It is thought that the plan could lead to the laying off of hundreds of workers.

Scottish council workers strike

Around 150,000 council staff in Scotland staged their second 24-hour strike over pay in two months.

Schools, ferry services and refuse collections were all affected as members of the Unite, Unison and GMB unions took part in the action.

The strike follows the rejection of an amended offer from the local authority umbrella group COSLA to change the 2.5 percent pay offer from three years to one year. The unions are calling for a 5 percent increase in line with inflation.

Zimbabwean teachers strike for increase in minimum salaries

Zimbabwean teachers from state schools, mission schools and others have been on strike since the beginning of September. They are demanding an increase in their minimum salary to the equivalent of US$1,200 per month.

As a result of the strike, teaching in most schools in the

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country has stopped. Teachers arrive at school in the morning (as they have been advised to do by their union to avoid victimisation), but then refuse to work.

The Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) has blamed the dispute on "pathetic salaries, poor working conditions and an unsafe political environment," according to a report by the Harare-based *Financial Gazette*. The union claims that "the eclipse of misery enveloping teachers is too dark to imagine."

Lecturers in universities and other institutions of tertiary education are also demonstrating their discontent by delaying the beginning of the new semester.

According to statistics released by PTUZ, about 25,000 teachers left Zimbabwe last year because of poor working conditions.

Tanzanian bank workers take strike action in spite of intimidation

Two thousand Tanzanian bank workers, employed by National Microfinance Bank (NMB), took strike action on September 22, causing all 120 branches to close. The workers are demanding payment of a promised lump sum stemming from the privatization of the bank in 2005, when the government sold off a 49 percent stake in the NMB—34.9 percent to Rabobank of the Netherlands and 14.1 percent to Exim Bank Tanzania Ltd. The government is in the process of selling off another 21 percent of the bank.

At a news conference, NMB Chief Executive Ben Christiaanse claimed that the strike was illegal. He insisted that it would have a minimal effect on the company's listing on the bourse.

Burundi: Doctors hold two-day strike over pay and conditions

Hundreds of doctors in Burundi held a two-day strike September 22 and 23. Only emergency cases were treated at public hospitals.

The doctors, who are currently paid less than $100 a month, are extraordinarily overworked. There is a ratio of 40,000 people to each government-employed doctor. The workload increased even more when the government promised free health care to expectant mothers and all children under five.

Reuters quoted Willy Gatore, the strikers' spokesperson, who stated, "Our claims have been known by authorities since 2004 but nothing has been done to improve our work and living conditions."

Many public sector workers are angry over the falling value of their wages. Annual inflation has risen to 28.1 percent, driven up by world commodity prices.

Woolworths workers still on strike in South Africa

Workers involved in strike action to demand union recognition at Woolworths stores in South Africa have voted unanimously to continue the action, according to the SA Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU). The union has given notice of the extension of the strike to the company and claims that this means that it will continue as a legally protected action.

Sapa has reported a claim by the union that its members have suffered "problems with store managers who, without respite, continue in their attempts to frustrate and intimidate striking workers." The union told the news agency that strikers had also experienced "serious problems" with property owners, mall managers, mall security and the police. "A series of applications for interdicts by mall owners and managers against striking workers has gone to court in attempts to break the strike, some have been thrown out of court while others are still being challenged."

SACCAWU maintained that Woolworths was trying to assert a union-free workplace, which was something that neither it nor or any trade union in the country would tolerate. "Our demands remain the recognition of SACCAWU, negotiation of a relationship agreement, access to company premises for union officials to engage in union activities as well as stop order facilities [for union fees to be deducted from salaries]."

Sapa reported that the union was appealing to "international allies" to put pressure on Woolworths, particularly in Australia where Woolworths has expanded over the last few years.

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