

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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## French ports workers strike

Port workers at the Fos-Lavera oil hub near Marseille have been on strike for a week, according to latest reports. Their action has blocked almost 50 ships, including 13 oil tankers and 22 oil product vessels, three chemical and seven gas tankers from entering France's largest oil port.

The strike is in protest at the privatisation of the port complex. French unions and port employers signed an agreement in October, opening the way to privatise seven ports, including Fos-Lavera. The strategic port, with an annual oil traffic of 64.2 million tonnes, supplies crude to six refineries in southern and eastern France with an output capacity of 800,000 barrels per day (bpd). Crude from the terminal also supplies the 310,000-bpd Miro refinery in Germany and the 68,000-bpd Cressier refinery in Switzerland.

France's petroleum industry body, UFIP, said that the dispute had cost the oil industry US\$1.0-1.5 million a day and was forcing refiners to lower their output.

A Marseille port spokeswoman said that a final deal, which will see private companies take over unloading at the docks previously run by the state, needs to be approved by the end of January.

## Mass demonstrations in Ireland to counter attacks on education

Between 40,000 and 70,000 people protested in Dublin on December 6 against spending cuts in education in what is believed to have been the largest demonstration in the capital since protests against the Iraq war. The protest formed part of a growing number of demonstrations against recent government policy announcements.

The demonstration was intended to highlight issues such as the increase in the pupil-teacher ratio, the removal of free book schemes and English support teachers, the condition of school buildings and the removal of grants for Traveller education.

Protesters carried numerous placards, including ones that read, "Schools Unite Against Cuts," "Leave Our Kids Alone," "Don't Make Our Children Pay" and "28:1, Good Odds for a Horse, Not A Child."

Teachers, parents and children marched from Parnell Square to Merrion Square as a series of nationwide protests against education cuts reached its climax. The march was organised jointly by the Association of Secondary Teachers (ASTI), the INTO and the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI).

The unions claim that altogether 120,000 people have now marched against the school spending measures in the budget when previous demonstrations in Donegal, Cork, Galway and Tullamore are considered.

Tens of thousands of teachers, students and parents have held a series of protests against staff shortages and increased class sizes in recent months. The government recently gave in to one of the teachers' demands and allocated additional funding to hire substitute teachers in secondary schools.

The government presented the 2009 budget in October, almost two months earlier than usual, to respond to a rising shortfall in tax revenues after Ireland slid into recession. This week, it said a further deterioration in public finances showed it would miss some targets set out in the 2009 budget. The government expects the 2009 budget deficit to reach 6.5 percent of gross domestic product, more than double the level allowed by European Union rules, despite cutting spending and raising several different taxes in October.

## Irish childcare workers and parents protest

Hundreds of parents and childcare workers protested, December 11, in response to controversial government funding changes they believe could devastate the sector and lead to widespread creche closures, according to the *Irish Independent*.

The protests in Dublin and Cork are aimed at forcing a "re-think" on the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS) that, critics claim, will generate both higher fees and the closure of smaller creches.

Childcare organiser at the union, SIPTU, Darragh O'Connor said, "Up until recently, projects received a staffing grant that allowed them to set fees that took full account of the individual circumstances of each family. However, the introduction of the CCSS has seen this replaced by a rigid set of criteria that has seen fees rise dramatically for many low-wage families."

In some cases, the impact on fees has been enormous—with some facilities increasing their charges for working parents by €113 a week. One parent, Michael Daly, of the Brooklodge Community Playschool, in Glanmire, Cork, said that the new government funding policies are making life impossible.

"There are roughly 40 children in the group—and it became very apparent last week that the playschool will be in a deficit of up to €4,000 and the parents will have to make-up the shortfall. And a lot of parents are finding it hard in the current economic climate," he said.

## Strike threats from UK postal workers

Postal workers in the Bridgwater area of Somerset have voted to strike over their working conditions, according to the BBC. Members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) plan to walk out at Christmas in protest at their full-time jobs being replaced with part-time roles.

The dates of the strikes have yet to be announced.

Around 400 postal workers at the Bolton Mail Centre in Farnworth are to stage a 24-hour strike on December 19—one of the busiest mail days of the year—in protest at plans to close the centre.

The Stonehill Road depot is due to shut in 2010 as part of a Royal Mail cost-cutting exercise. In a ballot, CWU members at the depot voted by 77 percent in favour of the strike. Other Royal Mail centres at Stockport, Crewe and Liverpool will also be shut on the same day because of industrial action.

### **Rail workers on London Tube in second strike for pay parity**

Rail workers responsible for finding structural faults and maintaining the electrical supply to London's underground rail network began their second 36-hour strike December 7 after employer EDF Energy Powerlink refused to budge on their claim for pay parity with day workers.

Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) General Secretary Bob Crow said, "Despite the overwhelming vote for action and an absolutely rock-solid strike in November, EDF Energy Powerlink has so far refused to acknowledge that shift testers should have pay-parity with their non-shift colleagues. Day-work staff rightly received a £3,000 increase for delivering flexibility, and their shift-working colleagues are simply seeking recognition of the flexibility they too have delivered, not least in accepting sweeping shift changes that have disrupted their work-life balance."

Shift testers are responsible for finding and fixing faults at London Underground's more than 250 power substations and maintaining the power supply. In ballots in October, RMT members voted by 21 to 2 for strike action and by 22 to 1 for action short of strikes. The first 36-hour strike by the 250 shift testers was held between November 16 and 18. Since November 16, they have made themselves unavailable for work after the end of any turns unless there is a direct and imminent danger to human life.

### **Demonstration by the Iraqi engineers in central Baghdad**

Around 250 engineers took part in a sit-in, December 2, at Firdos Square in central Baghdad. The workers later on marched to the Ministry of Agriculture. Demonstrators demanded the restoration of professional allowances that were halted after April 9, 2003.

The protest was organised by the Union of Agricultural Engineers. Representatives of unions of teachers, veterinarians and health professionals also joined the protest. The president of the union announced that if its demands are not met by the Ministry of Agriculture, the union will call for a general strike in all the ministries across Iraq.

### **Striking Chevron oil workers injured by security forces in Nigeria**

On December 3, striking workers at the Chevron plant in the Delta area of Nigeria set up a picket outside the plant. *Vanguard* reported that the strikers used more than 100 tankers to barricade the entrance to the plant and temporarily halted traffic along the NPA Expressway. The strikers were protesting the threatened sacking of 122 workers for indicating their interest in joining the National Union of Petroleum and Gas Workers (NUPENG).

According to *Vanguard*, "Anti-crime mobile, regular policemen and soldiers, who were drafted in to beef up security at the company, threw tear gas and used gun butts to beat members of the union in an orchestrated effort to break up their rank[s]."

Fifteen strikers were injured, and some of them had to be taken to hospital for treatment.

The local NUPENG chairperson, who was beaten by the security personnel, said, "We are here to tell Deltans [residents of the Niger Delta] and Nigerians of police and soldiers' brutality on innocent Nigerians.... Today we are at Chevron's gate right now to protest CNL management grand design to flush out NUPENG members in the company's operations." He claimed that Chevron gave the security operatives an order to shoot on sight.

### **Namibian fish factory workers on strike over pay**

Workers at Pescanova fish factory in Lüderitz, Namibia, went out on strike on December 9, after pay negotiations failed to produce an agreement.

In previous years, there have been several strikes and other disputes at the factory. Last year, a strike over pay and the company's failure to honor an agreement to make temporary workers permanent was narrowly averted.

### **Nigerian doctors on strike**

Civil service doctors in Anambra State, Nigeria, have been on strike for two months. The dispute is over an unpaid 22 percent salary increase, which has been approved for doctors nationwide. Another cause of anger is the gulf that has opened up between their terms of employment and those of the specialist doctors.

Doctors employed within local government, where they are designated medial officers of health, and hospital consultants are continuing to work.

The all-out indefinite strike of Nigerian judiciary staff, which began on December 1, continues to paralyze the law courts. In Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, the gates of the High Court have been locked, and in other areas of the country, gates leading to judicial complexes have been barricaded.

A representative of the Judicial Staff Union of Nigeria told the press that the action, which is over pay and conditions, would last until the government calls the union back to the negotiating table.



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