

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Railway and airport workers strike in Hungary

Hungarian rail workers struck in a pay dispute this week. The strike was called by the Railway Workers Free Trade Union (VDSZSZ), whose members struck in the eastern part of the country on December 14. The action was extended nationwide the following day.

The workers are demanding a 10 percent wage increase and a one-off bonus of 250,000 forints (934 euro) from the proceeds of the sale of state railway firm MAV's freight unit. The strike resulted in virtually all train services nationwide being halted. MAV issued a statement on the impact of the industrial action, which read, "Domestic express and intercity rail traffic has practically ceased, and international trains are not leaving for Hungary."

According to reports, MAV failed to reach an agreement with striking unions at a meeting on Tuesday. On December 17 as the strike entered its fourth day, Finance Minister János Veres said the demands of the railway workers' union would not be met. He stated, "The government cannot meet groundless demands. In today's Hungary it is unrealistic to demand a ten percent pay rise."

The union has not stated how long the strike is to last and confirmed that a full rail service is planned for December 24, 25 and 26.

In a separate dispute, members of two trade unions at Budapest Airport are demanding better working conditions, a new collective agreement and a halt to layoffs. A strike for over a week has led to flight cancellations and delays. In an attempt to break the strike, management recruited 23 Greek and 31 Hungarian workers during the dispute.

By December 17, press reports speculated that trade unions were close to agreeing with management to end the dispute. According to the Hungarian News Agency MTI, BA spokesman Domokos Szollar said that 200 employees out of 299 had returned to work on Wednesday morning.

Pharmaceuticals staff in London strike to demand pay, oppose job losses

On December 16, some 100 workers at the Chemilines pharmaceuticals factory in northwest London began the first of three separate days of action in a pay dispute.

The employees, mostly female members of the GMB trade union, have rejected the firm's pay offer linked to productivity increases. They are also demanding the reinstatement of 25 colleagues who have been made redundant.

In a ballot, the 68 GMB members voted unanimously to strike. As the ballot was taking place management laid off 25 of the 100 employees at the plant. Further strikes are set for December 22 and January 7.

CGIL trade union calls partial strike in Italy

Members of the CGIL trade union federation in Italy staged a four-hour nationwide strike on December 12. The union is protesting against the government of Silvio Berlusconi's policies on salaries, pensions and education reform.

Hundreds of CGIL members participated in a march in torrential rain in Rome. The action was weakened by the CGIL, as it had announced the previous day that its members employed on the public railways and on subway, bus and tram services in Rome and Milan would not be involved. The strike was opposed by two other trade union federations, the CISL and UIL, as "irresponsible."

Ulster Television employees protest job losses and cutbacks

On December 17, Ulster Television (UTV) journalists, reporters, presenters, cameramen and other employees protested outside their studios in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

UTV is planning to cut around a third of the 118-strong workforce at its TV division. It has cited the worsening economic situation and broadcasting proposals from the communications regulator Ofcom, that UTV's news output can be reduced from about five hours a week to four. The protest followed the breakdown in talks between UTV management and trade union representatives.

Irish ready meal suppliers protest factory closure in Republic of Ireland

On December 16, 150 staff employed at the Swissco ready-meal supplier plant in Little Island in Cork held a sit-down protest. The workers are protesting plans by the company to close the facility and to demand wage arrears. The workers protested for about 12 hours.

On December 15, workers at the plant were told that they were being made redundant following the appointment of a liquidator. The SIPTU trade union said that it had obtained an agreement that outstanding wages would be paid. Swissco, a subsidiary of International Cuisine, one of Europe's biggest catering operations, had been in operation in Cork since 1974.

Teachers boycott marking exams in Botswana

Teachers in Botswana have boycotted marking the Botswana Government Certificate in Secondary Education (BGCSE) and Junior Certificate (JC) exams in the Setswana language.

One of those involved told *Mmegi/The Reporter* that the boycott was to protest at the way that the Botswana Examinations Council (BEC) was exploiting them: "The contract that we signed was from December 1 to 14. Because we are going to finish marking late, we wanted a new contract with better pay."

Rather than increasing the teachers' pay, the BEC has reduced it from US\$550 to US\$102. The teachers are being paid US\$1.53 per script.

Zimbabwean health workers reject pay offer

Zimbabwean doctors and nurses have rejected a government offer to pay salaries in dollars of between US\$30 and \$400. Cooks and cleaners are on the lowest salary level. Nurses would have received US\$60. Only the most senior doctors would have received US\$400.

Health workers from Harare (the capital city), Chitungwiza and Parirenyatwa have already rejected the offer, saying they will accept "nothing less than US\$1,500." The secretary general of the Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors' Association described the offer as an "embarrassment."

Striking Nigerian port workers bring city center to standstill

Striking port workers in Lagos, Nigeria brought the Marina area to a standstill on December 16. The protest was in response to the Port Authority's refusal to implement a seven-month-old agreement on welfare benefits.

The workers barricaded off the area around the Marina for several hours. Some of the placards read, "NPA, tomorrow is too late, we want our new rate now" and "Dockworkers are paid peanuts in Nigeria."

One of the protest leaders said, "We are here to draw the attention of the Federal Government, EFCC [Economic and Financial Crimes Commission], Senate and House of Representatives to ways and manners Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA) is maltreating workers and wasting government money."

Nigeria doctors' strike

Doctors have gone on strike at the Federal Medical Centre in Umuahia, in Abia State, Nigeria. Dr. Nduka Ukaegbu told reporters they had taken this action following an assault on a doctor by members of the public.

Algerian hospital strike

Algerian health unions have called a strike of doctors and other health care workers in support of a 300 percent pay claim.

Professor Noureddine Zidouni, who heads the National Union of Medical Science Teachers and Docents (SNPDSM), told reporters:

"The whole university hospital community is working together in this protest to put forward our social demands. We are providing a minimum service, and under no circumstances will patients suffer because of the stoppage."

"We are stopping work because we are completely broken down by the injustice being inflicted on our community. We have degrees and skills which would be recognised in other countries, but we have chosen to remain here."

Algerian members of parliament have recently awarded themselves a 300 percent pay rise. The pay of even the most experienced doctor is less than half that of an MP.



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