

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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

## France: unions at main carrier call for strike over wages and jobs

Trade unions at Air France have called for strike action on January 29, to coincide with nationwide industrial action in opposition to dwindling wage values and increased job insecurity.

According to *Reuters*, seven unions said they planned to join nationwide protests over wages and labour negotiations.

The projected strike will be the first such action across different professions since May 2008 when up to 700,000 people took to the streets.

## Germany: Lufthansa cabin crew in possible warning strikes

Lufthansa flight attendants could stage warning strikes in the next few days or weeks over a pay dispute, the Independent Flight Attendant Organisation (UFO) union told *Reuters* on January 18.

UFO broke off a third unsuccessful round of negotiations on Friday. The union is calling for a wage and benefits rise of 15 percent for 12 months for around 16,000 employees at Lufthansa and other group airlines.

Lufthansa called on UFO to return to the negotiating table and face up to “economic realities.”

Passenger numbers have declined sharply in the face of the economic crisis. In October, Lufthansa cut its 2008 operating profit goal to 1.1 billion euros (\$1.46 billion) from a previous estimate of around the 2007 level of 1.38 billion.

## Italy: Revamped Alitalia faces first strike

Flight attendants and ground staff at Alitalia took strike action for four hours on January 19, in protest at new labour contracts and the criteria used to hire employees as part of the airline’s relaunch.

This was the first industrial dispute since Italy’s main airline was restructured the previous week under a new network and private ownership.

The airline was forced to cancel 22 flights—including six to international destinations in Europe and the Middle East.

Unofficial protests at Rome and Milan airports also marred the launch of the new Alitalia January 13, causing some delays and cancellations.

*Reuters* news agency reported: “Analysts are watching to see whether a restructured Alitalia with weakened unions is able to avoid the labour strife which repeatedly frustrated the efforts of its predecessor to turn itself around and report a profit.”

Two associations, Adusbef and Federconsumatori, this week called on the civil aviation authority to end Alitalia’s monopoly on the Rome-Fiumicino to Milan-Linate route, denouncing the €320 cost of a single ticket for the 50-minute flight.

Separately, Air Italy, a small domestic airline, took out newspaper advertisements pledging to charge a maximum €120 on that route if given a licence.

The new Alitalia is a private company owned by a group of Italian investors who have merged much of the old carrier’s profitable assets with the much smaller Air One. Air France-KLM is a minority shareholder. Under the special bankruptcy law passed for Alitalia by the government of Silvio Berlusconi, certain anti-trust provisions were suspended.

The SDL union has said it may call a further 24-hour strike at an unspecified date.

## Hungary: Workers launch strike at Budapest Airport

On January 19, workers launched strike action against Budapest Airport. The strike is a continuation of an industrial dispute that began on December 10, but which was suspended to resume negotiations.

Workers operating in passenger security screening are part of those on strike.

Airport officials claimed that no flights were cancelled, but one of the three terminals was closed.

Budapest Airport is part of a consortium in which Germany's Hochtief is a major partner. The striking unions have charged management with refusal to compromise.

### **Ireland: Czech Airlines workers to take industrial action**

Workers at Czech Airlines went on strike at Dublin airport January 16 in protest at job cuts resulting from the company's decision to close its Dublin hub.

The union SIPTU said the strike action relates to the airline's refusal to offer Irish staff more than statutory redundancy in their severance terms.

### **Ireland: warning of strikes in opposition to public pay cuts**

According to the *Irish Times*, SIPTU, the largest union in the country, "has warned of the likelihood of strikes and civil disruption if the Government imposes cuts in public sector pay and social benefits."

In an internal letter to members, the union's three most senior officials—Jack O'Connor, Brendan Hayes and Joe O'Flynn—said the problem in the public finances was "very serious". They said they wanted a negotiated agreement on economic recovery involving a "social solidarity pact", with all sectors contributing.

On January 18, the Irish Nurses Organisation (INO) said it would not enter into any talks with the government that had the potential to reduce the pay, in any form, of its members.

The *Irish Times* reported that it would be seeking immediate clarification through the Irish Congress of Trade Unions about the agenda for the talks this week between the Government and the social partners on the economy.

Although ICTU has publicly rejected the possibility of any deal with the Government which involves cuts in basic pay, among some senior union leaders there has been consideration about a possible deal on increments or premium payments.

Separately, around 9,500 health sector workers in Dublin have voted overwhelmingly for industrial action in the event of the Health Service Executive (HSE) seeking to introduce changes in pay and conditions without agreement.

The majority vote (98 percent of union members) includes porters,

caterers, security staff, ambulance workers and healthcare assistants.

No date has been set as of yet for the commencement of industrial action.

### **Egypt: Nile cotton workers' strike blocks highway**

Around 950 workers at Nile Cotton Co. in Miniya resumed their strike on January 13, according to a report in *el-Badeel*.

They struck after discovering that the company was backtracking from promises that ended the previous industrial action. Workers temporarily blocked the Miniya road before being forced back into the factory by security forces.

According to previous reports workers in four governorates staged sit-ins and strikes when they did not receive their full salaries for December.

Egypt: Spinning factory workers call off sit-in with call for independent union

According to a report in the *Daily News Egypt*, January 15, workers from the Ghazl El-Mahalla spinning factory have called off the sit-in they began eight days previously "because, they say, the company trade union does not represent their interests."

The workers say that they plan to resign from the official, state-controlled trade union and form an independent union, said the article.

This is the second sit-in the workers have organized after five workers were issued transfer orders last October.

The transfer orders were issued following a protest held at the Ghazl El-Mahalla factory on October 31 during which some 800 workers protested mismanagement and alleged financial losses within the company.

The 22 workers who staged the recently concluded sit-in demanded the revocation of the transfer orders and their return to their original posts as well as financial compensation for the transferred workers.

### **Egypt: Train drivers strike demanding outstanding pay increase**

All train traffic in and out of Cairo was stopped for five hours on January 20 as drivers went on strike, demanding the pay raise that was promised to them in November.

Negotiations took place between the head of the Railway Drivers League and the management, who offered to pay half of the promised increase starting from July this year, and the rest only from January 2010.

According to the blog of a Swedish journalist in Cairo, most of the

drivers took this offer as an insult, and refused to end the strike despite attempts from the state-controlled union to persuade them to accept the offer.

“I’m not going home. I’m sleeping here on the ground,” one of the drivers said.

While another asked: “What are we going to eat until July?”

Under increased pressure from security forces, the drivers cleared the tracks while negotiations continued for another 20 minutes inside the driver’s rest house. The end result was that there will be a new meeting between the workers and the management in ten days.

The lowest paid drivers have a basic salary of less than 200 Egyptian pounds after years of service.

### **Egypt: Telemasr workers protest job and pay insecurity**

*El-Badeel* reported that 140 workers at the Telemasr branch in Ismailiyya and 200 at the main branch in Cairo demonstrated on January 18 against the decision to partially close the factory and leave 300 workers without work and only half the pay.

Workers have protested previously against the transfer of workers from the Cairo branch to Ismailiyya and attempts to sell parts of the equipment and land in Cairo.

The privatization of Telemasr in the late 1990s was accompanied by corruption charges and led to an increase in job insecurity and decreased wages for its workers.

### **Kenyan teachers on nationwide strike over pay**

Over 200,000 members of the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) and Kenya Union of Post-Primary Education Teachers (Kuppet) went out on strike on January 19 to win an immediate pay increase of 35 percent. The government has said it must be phased in over three years.

The Teachers Service Commission (TSC) responded by instructing all heads of schools and other institutions to punish those taking action. The Kenyan Education Minister threatened the strikers with loss of pay or firings unless they returned to work, but this did not produce the intended result.

At least 12 teachers were arrested on the first day of the strike, which saw a large police presence in several cities including Mombasa, the main port. Police used tear gas to disperse demonstrators in Mombasa.

### **Nigerian telecom workers demonstrate over pay arrears**

Angry Nigerian telecom workers demonstrated outside the offices of the Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (Nitel) over non-payment of salaries and severance allowances on January 19.

The workers are owed salary arrears of N2.5 billion (US\$17.2m) that accumulated from June to December 2008 and N17 billion (US\$116.7m) from a five-year pension buy-out.

Workers on the demonstration came from several states around the country, including Kaduna, Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Niger and Kogi.

### **Zimbabwean rail workers on strike to demand payment in US dollars**

Rail workers employed by the National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) in Bulawayo are on strike to demand payment in US dollars rather than the near-worthless Zimbabwean currency. At the time of writing one dollar is equivalent to around a trillion Zimbabwean dollars, but hyperinflation means that this changes all the time.

Five of the striking workers were injured when riot police moved in to disperse a union meeting held at Bulawayo’s railway platform last week.

SW Radio Africa’s Bulawayo correspondent explained “The NRZ area manager came uninvited to the meeting in the company of riot police. When the workers refused to deal with him, he ordered the riot police to disperse the group, who did so with their usual brutal efficiency.”

Teachers are also on strike over similar issues, and the armed forces are now showing signs of discontent.



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