

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

20 February 2009

## Germany: Two major Berlin airports face strikes

*Reuters* reported February 13 that the German trade union Verdi has said that public sector workers would stage token strikes at Berlin's two international airports (Tegel and Schoenefeld) on February 19. The strikes would last around two hours, and would back workers' demands for an 8 percent wage increase.

Employers have offered an increase of only 1.3 percent.

Around 700,000 employees of federal states are involved and a settlement would be applied to about 1.3 million civil servants.

Earlier this month, thousands of public sector workers staged brief strikes that affected transport and schools across the country. Public transport was severely affected in 10 cities, while schools and hospitals suffered walkouts in northern Germany.

Italy: Thousands protest government's response to economic crisis

Tens of thousands of factory workers, public employees and unemployed workers marched through the streets of the Italian capital February 13 in protest of the government's response to the economic crisis.

Cars and buses came to a standstill across much of Rome as three demonstrations made their way through the historic centre. The demonstrations added to the disruption already caused by the heavy security measures in place for the Group of Seven industrial nations finance meeting in the city the next day.

Protesters held up red union flags and banners reading, "More Wages, More Rights" and "No More False Promises."

The protests were part of a nationwide strike staged by Italy's largest union, the CGIL. Organisers said the eight-hour protest drew a crowd of 700,000 people, including strikers and supporters, reported *Javno*.

Metalworkers and public sector workers on the demonstrations called for better contracts and tax hikes on the rich to provide aid for those affected by the crisis. Many protesters were concerned about their job security.

The protests coincided with the release of the latest figures on the Italian economy. With the global slump being felt across Europe, Italy reported its worst slump since 1980, with gross domestic product in the fourth quarter of 2008 contracting by 1.8 percent from the previous quarter and 2.6 percent from a year earlier. It was the third straight quarter of contraction.

## UK: Financial Times journalists vote for strike ballot

Journalists working for the major economic daily, the *Financial Times* (FT), voted February 12 to hold a ballot on strike action in a bid to stave off compulsory redundancies.

According to the *Guardian* newspaper, representatives of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), including the head of publishing, Barry Fitzpatrick, held talks with FT management over the vote, which could see staff balloted in three weeks on potential industrial action.

The FT intends to axe 80 positions, including 20 journalists. According to the NUJ, compulsory redundancies will take place in March among the paper's editorial teams covering UK companies, personal finance and business education.

The *Guardian* reports that FT journalists are angry due to the fact that in January, parent company Pearson told them—despite tough economic times—that earnings from the business, which includes book publisher Penguin, would exceed forecasts.

## UK: Thames Water workers consider strike ballot

According to the Swindon Trades Union Congress web site on February 14, Thames Water employees are considering a ballot on strike action after discovering a further 300 Swindon jobs could be outsourced to India.

The company has told workers that they either needed to sign new "family unfriendly" contracts or face losing their jobs.

Thames Water is owned by the Australian banking group Macquarie.

## Ireland: Bus drivers and rail workers vote to strike

Around 1,000 drivers belonging to the National Bus & Rail Union (NBRU) overwhelmingly backed a February 12 proposal for industrial action, up to and including full strike action, if the companies press ahead with proposed cutbacks as part of a "restructuring plans."

The *Irish Times* reported that the company intends to cut 270 vehicles—120 from Dublin Bus and 150 from Bus Éireann—which could result in more than 600 workers being laid off, including 270 drivers.

The two state bus companies say they are each facing losses of more than €30 million this year unless "corrective action" is taken.

Both bus companies intend to implement the first phase of their cutback plans next month by terminating the employment of some 160 probationary drivers.

The NBRU, which represents 3,200 workers in both companies, wants the companies to instead introduce a voluntary redundancy scheme for existing drivers.

Bus Éireann said it would not be appropriate to provide details of planned changes until it had first met with union representatives.

Last week, drivers at Dublin Bus, belonging to the union Siptu, voted in favour of industrial action.

### **Ireland: public sector workers may take industrial action**

The *Irish Examiner* reported February 13, that public sector workers are to ballot for strike action.

The Public Service Executive Union (PSEU) is to ballot its 7,000 members for up to four days of strike action in protest at the public sector pension levy.

The PSEU, which has executive members of the civil service, will ask members affected by the levy to take two days of strike action initially, to be followed by two additional days of strikes in various areas.

PSEU general secretary designate Tom Geraghty, said he did not want to have to resort to the strike action and remained committed to attempts by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) to resolve the situation through a return to social partnership talks with employers and the government.

The ICTU has organised a national day of protest for February 21, but has made clear there will be no sanctioned marches across the country, and that for “logistical reasons” it must restrict the action to a single march in Dublin.

### **Ireland: Teachers to vote on industrial action over pension dispute**

Over 60,000 teachers and lecturers are to be balloted on industrial action over the pension levy row.

Three unions, representing primary and secondary level teachers, have announced separate ballots, while the executive of the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) is to meet next week to discuss the issue.

Don Ryna, president of the Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI), said that branch meetings had been packed to the rafters with members furious over the government’s “scapegoating” of the public service.

### **Iran: Teachers to strike over pay and conditions**

According to reports on the Iranian Workers’ Solidarity Network (IWSN), there is solid support for a proposed strike on February 21-23 from teachers in various towns and cities in Iran. The teachers are demanding better pay and conditions.

The lack of access to the press and the media in general for publicising the strike, say the IWSN, has meant that news about the countrywide strike has been passed on using SMS, email, personal weblogs and telephone conversations.

An example cited is that of Ardabil, in Azerbaijan province, where the teachers of two secondary schools and a high school have used SMS texts to get messages to their friends and colleagues about the strike.

In Tabriz, also in Azerbaijan province, the students of a secondary school have reportedly been asking their teachers about the strike during

lessons.

### **Egypt: Truck drivers’ strike attacked by police**

A *Reuters* report filed February 15 described how a strike by Egyptian truck owners—against new regulations banning articulated vehicles—had turned violent and caused major road disruption.

Police detained 35 truck drivers in the Nile Delta province of Gharbia on February 15. Later police fired teargas to disperse protesters who marched to the law courts in an attempt to free their comrades by force, the sources said.

The protesters damaged some cars and minibuses during the march, the source added.

According to the report, in other parts of the province police detained 11 truck drivers and owners on suspicion that they threw stones at trucks that are not taking part in the strike. On one road near the southern city of Assiut, protesting truck owners reportedly held up traffic for hours.

The strike is in protest at new regulations banning articulated vehicles, purportedly to prevent accidents, starting in about 18 months. The owners say they will lose large amounts of money and some of their equipment will be worthless.

According to the *Reuters* report, the recent strike has pushed up the prices of building materials because of higher transport costs. The price of cement has risen to £950 a tonne from £520, merchants in Gharbia province said.

A truck owner in the Nile Delta province of Menufia, who asked to remain anonymous, said police were visiting truckers at home and putting pressure on them to resume work. They have threatened some owners with detention and have given others tickets for obstructing the highways, owners said.

*Al-Masry Al-Youm* reported that in Gharbia governorate, the drivers threatened to stage a sit-in before the headquarters of the People’s Assembly if the government did not respond to their demands and backtrack on its decision banning trailers as of 2011.

### **Workers on strike in Anambra state, Nigeria**

Workers in Anambra State, Nigeria went out on strike February 12 to demand a pay increase of 12 percent. The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) called the strike only after the state government had ignored three ultimatums.

On February 13, all government offices in Awka (the state capital) and other towns and the state-owned schools were kept shut.

### **Zimbabwean teachers stay out on strike**

In spite of a promise by new Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai that they would be paid in foreign currency this month, Zimbabwean teachers

have decided not to end their strike. Instead they have demanded a clearly laid-out breakdown of how much teachers will receive per month.

An official of the Zimbabwe Teachers Association (ZIMTA) said that the union welcomed Tsvangirai's announcement, but that teachers wanted more details of the proposed hard currency packages. "What is now left is to clearly state the amount every teacher will get and we will weigh, as a union, whether to resume duty or not."

The Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) took a similar position on the government offer. The PTUZ president said: "Our demands are still the same. Telling us that we will be paid in forex is not enough."

One week before making its latest announcement, the government had threatened to dismiss the striking teachers and replace them with temporary staff.

### **Striking South African university staff members face rubber bullets on campus**

Police fired rubber bullets at striking university staff protesting on the Pretoria campus of Tshwane University of Technology on February 11. University staff has been on strike over pay since January 24. The strikers are members of the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu). Nehawu officials met with the South African education minister on February 16.

### **Health workers strike over pay in Côte d'Ivoire**

Members of the National Union of Senior Medical Staff of Côte d'Ivoire

(SYNACASS-CI) are on strike over low pay. The union said the government has not honored past agreements to improve their salaries and working conditions.

Doctors are earning around US\$330 per month and nurses \$240. SYNACASS-CI said the government should have applied a previously agreed salary rise this year, increasing the salary for doctors to over \$1,000.

On February 17, Health Minister Allah Kouadio Remi used a broadcast on national television to denounce the strike as "illegal."



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