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.*

UK: Journalists fight redundancies

Journalists across Britain and Northern Ireland are involved in a struggle against redundancies, with hundreds taking industrial action and thousands more being balloted on strikes.

Voting papers are being sent to the National Union of Journalists' nearly 4,000 members at the BBC, after the broadcasting corporation announced compulsory redundancies in Scotland.

Journalists at neighbouring Shropshire Newspapers and Staffordshire Newspapers have backed industrial action over cutbacks by big margins. Journalists at *Newsquest York* have given notice of possible strike action every weekday until the end of March. Ballots for industrial action over cutbacks are also under way at the *Derry Journal* in Northern Ireland, the *Independent* in London, and the Surrey-based Reed Business Information magazine group.

At Burton-on-Trent-based Staffordshire Newspapers, 93 percent voted for industrial action, with 80 percent backing strike action.

There is also concern amongst journalists over the possible closure of district offices in Sawdlincote, Leek and Uttoxeter.

At Telford-based Shropshire Newspapers, 83 percent voted for industrial action, with 59 percent backing a possible strike. Reporters at Yorkshire Post Newspapers returned to work February 23 after four days of strike action.

Journalists at the BBC World Service's South Asian service are protesting outsourcing proposals that would mean worse working conditions and news produced under local censorship laws. According to the Associated Press of Pakistan, BBC World Service management intends to impose a restructuring plan, endangering 34 jobs in Hindi, Urdu and Nepali sections, without an agreement with the trade unions.

The BBC journalists have been protesting for the last 15 months against "reckless offshoring". The BBC World Service has created private limited subsidiary companies in India and Pakistan to run its broadcast and online operations from there. Management is asking its staff to accept inferior terms and remuneration from these newly created companies or be made redundant.

Ireland: National one-day strike proposed for March 30

Thousands of workers in the Irish Republic are set to ballot for a national one-day strike in protest at a refusal to pay the national wage agreement.

The strike on March 30 could affect the entire public sector, as well as private sector employers who have refused to pay the wage agreement.

Unions announced February 24 that balloting will begin next week unless the government returns to negotiations on a three-year agreement. The Public Service Executive Union (PSEU), with 10,500 members across government departments, voted by a margin of 71-29 in favour of action. The turnout was over 75 percent, according to RTÉ News.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) said the agreement would be based on its 10-point plan for economic recovery and would include a reworking of the national pay deal and public sector pension levy, which prompted the 120,000-strong demonstration in Dublin last Saturday.

Without agreement, ICTU General Secretary David Begg warned that balloting on the national work stoppage will begin and predicted "a Doomsday situation".

Speaking on RTÉ's "Questions and Answers" on February 23, Minister for Arts, Sport & Tourism Martin Cullen ruled out any major changes to the pension levy. But senior government sources in Dublin February 24 indicated that talks may be reconvened before the proposed national strike.

Ireland: Teachers may strike

Three teacher unions begin balloting this week on industrial action up to strike action, in opposition to the public service pension levy and education cutbacks. Hundreds of teaching jobs are to be axed due to budget cuts announced by Education Minister Batt O'Keeffe.

The results of the ballots are expected to be announced by the end of next week by the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (18,000 members), the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (30,000 members) and the Teachers' Union of Ireland (14,500 members).

The Irish Federation of University Teachers will decide on March 7 whether to ballot its 2,000 members on industrial action. General Secretary Mike Jennings said it will await the government response to Saturday's demonstration in Dublin against government economic policies, including the public service pension levy.

Ireland: Diamond workers hold sit-in

Diamond manufacturer Element Six (formerly De beers Industrial Diamonds) in County Clare planned to implement a short-time roster from Monday. But the firm had to defer its plans on February 21 after 150 workers staged a sit-in at the plant's canteen.

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The company had planned to introduce a week-on/week-off system for up to 180 staff and a two-week-on/one-week-off arrangement for an additional 80 workers. The firm is also seeking 70 voluntary redundancies on top of the 150 the company announced in December.

The new roster would have seen many staff take a pay cut of up to 50 percent. The workers warned that if agreement could not be reached, they would sit in again. Following talks with representatives from the union SIPTU, the company agreed to defer the introduction of the short-time roster for one week.

Russia: Seamen on strike

Seamen in the Russian Far East port of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky have gone on strike, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Russian Service reported February 19. The seamen had refused for one week to unload coal from a cargo ship, demanding that their overdue salaries be paid first. Port officials told RFE/RL that the seamen aboard the cargo ship are not from the peninsula, and the owner of the ship is a resident of Primorye.

Israel: Workers in Galilee town oppose closure of food factory

Around 700 workers of the Pri Galil processed food company protested February 24 over the possible closure of the factory in the Galilee town of Hatzor Haglilit, reported *Haaretz*.

According to other reports, workers also burned tires at the entrance to the factory, and about 50 of the factory employees barricaded themselves inside the plant. Pri Galil's parent company, Vita Pri Galil, owes NIS 160 million to the Bank Leumi and Israel Discount Bank. Farmers and students also joined the rally, which took place along the town's main road. Residents of Hatzor Haglilit have launched a general strike in the town. Shimon Swissa, head of the Regional Council, said, "The closure of the factory is a closure of the entire community, which means a 30 percent unemployment rate in Hatzor. All means are legit in this struggle."

Residents have said that closing the factory would mean the loss of livelihood for over 400 families in Hatzor Haglilit. Albert Oved, a Pri Hagalil employee, told *Israel National News* February 23 that the factory is the sole source of income in town. "The factory provides livelihood for hundreds of families, among them families with many children that barely get by on their salary. And in addition, they want to close the factory—they'll be closing their lives... I hope that someone in the government will lend an ear and listen, for the sake of the residents of Hatzor Haglilit, but mostly for the sake of the children who are beneath the poverty line."

Motti Haziza, chairman of the Pri Hagalil labour union, called the district court to reject the Bank Leumi and Bank Discount request to call in the receivers. "The banks must understand that they are sitting on a socioeconomic powder keg," he said.

The chairman of the Histadrut trade union federation, Ofer Eini, told IDF Radio, "The Vita Galilee Fruit plant in Hatzor Haglilit is not the only one. I can't give names, but there are other factories in outlying areas that face economic collapse and mass layoffs."

Egypt: Pharmacists take strike action

Pharmacists took strike action February 17 in protest at the Tax Department cancelling an agreement signed with them.

Their union said that 95 percent of the pharmacies have complied. Sales managers of pharmaceutical companies said sales have fallen by 70 percent as a result of the dispute.

Striking Nigerian teachers threatened with dismissal

Nearly 3,000 employees in tertiary colleges in the state of Borno, Nigeria, have been threatened with dismissal unless they end their strike and return to work. The workers, both academic and non-academic, have been on strike for over five months to demand implementation of the Consolidated Teachers Salary Scale (CONTISS).

According to *Leadership* (Abuja), the state government has ordered the employers at every college to open a register "for any willing staff who wishes to resume, to write their names beginning from Friday [February 27]." A spokesperson for the employers told the press that any staff who failed to return to work within the stipulated period "would be considered to have withdrawn his/her service and his/her position would be advertised in the national dailies."

The Joint Committee of Unions in Tertiary Institutions has insisted there will be no return to the classroom unless the government meets their demands. The chairman of the committee, Mustapha Bukar Bennisheikh, told the press that the strikers would not be intimidated. He added that their demand for the implementation of CONTISS is non-negotiable.

An indefinite strike of teachers in primary and secondary schools in the state of Bayelsa, Nigeria, began on February 20. The action is to protest the non-implementation of the approved Teachers Salary Structure (TSS) agreed in January 2009 and non-payment of 15 percent salary arrears.

State Governor Timpre Sylva described the teachers' demands as unrealistic, "given the sharp drop in the state allocation caused by the global meltdown."

Three-day strike of health workers in Côte d'Ivoire

Medical workers throughout Côte d'Ivoire began a three-day strike on February 18 after talks with the government broke down. The action involved state doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists, veterinarians, lab technicians and orderlies. Members of the health union, SYNACASS-CI, told IRIN (a news and analysis service) that the government had failed to implement past agreements over improved salaries and working conditions. Health Minister Allah Kouadio Remi has denounced the strike as "illegal."

Atté Boka, spokesperson for the strikers, said that the situation was of the government's own making. "We do not like going on strike. We know that people are in hard times, given the situation of the country. But we have been forced to do so."

He explained that doctors currently earn on average $330 per month and nurses $240, and that a previously negotiated salary increase this year would have increased a doctor's salary to more than $1,000. Minister of Public Service Hubert Oulaye admitted that the government had been planning to raise medical workers' salaries in January, "but given the financial difficulties [we face], we put this off to 2010."

Medical workers are maintaining emergency care, similar to that normally provided on weekends and holidays.

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