

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

13 March 2009

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

Germany: Cabin crew strike averted at Lufthansa

Deutsche Lufthansa and cabin crew union UFO reached an agreement on wage increases on March 10, averting all-out strikes at the last minute, according to *Reuters*.

Flight attendants working for Germany's largest airline had voted March 9 to take open-ended strike action. The cabin crew's union, UFO, reported that 96 percent of those who voted were in favour of a walkout. Cabin crews staged two warning strikes in January, forcing the cancellation of 1,200 flights.

The union had officially demanded a 6.1 percent pay increase for the next 14 months as well as better benefits. The vote for the walkout came after the airline offered only 3.4 percent. UFO chief negotiator, Joachim Müller, said the union had lowered its original call for a wage increase of up to 15 percent due to the economic crisis.

Lufthansa said in a statement that the agreement included a 4.2 percent wage increase for around 16,000 cabin crews, effective from the beginning of the year and valid for only 14 months.

The company and union also agreed to one-off payments of €100, profit sharing for 2008 of up to 3 percent of staff-based salary and improved working conditions. Pushing for a better offer, cabin crews represented by UFO had staged protests twice, forcing the carrier to cancel dozens of flights and cope with delays.

Bulgaria: Steel workers' rally protests layoffs and pay

Hundreds of workers from Bulgaria's Kremikovtzi steel mill protested March 9, over planned lay-offs and unpaid salaries in the centre of the capital, Sofia.

Around 1,500 workers from the plant demonstrated, chanting, "Resign!" in front of the Economy Ministry and other government buildings.

Kremikovtzi—the largest steel maker in Bulgaria—was a flagship in Stalinist times. It was 71 percent privatised in 1999. It employs 5,000 workers but 90,000 people—including workers' families and supply chains—depend on it for their income.

The steel mill has sharply reduced its operations since August and a court declared it insolvent over its huge debt.

The workers, who have not received their salaries for the past three months, urged the government to find a solution to avert closure. They

demanded compensation of 30-times monthly salary if the plant was shut down.

The Economy Ministry said in a statement that it was still in discussions about an acquisition by Brazilian steelmaker CSN and could not discuss any other issues until these were completed.

Bulgaria has been heavily affected by flight of capital from former-Stalinist countries and recession in its main export markets to the European Union. Another Bulgarian steelmaker, Radomir Steel Industries, said this week that it intended to cut half its workforce due to a drop in orders from Europe and the United States and a cut-off in Russian gas supplies in January.

At least 50,000 people in Bulgaria—which has a population of 7.6 million—are likely to lose their jobs this year.

Russia: Steelworkers begin hunger strike over wage cuts

Sixteen Russian steelworkers at the Zlatoust steel mill, owned by steel group ESTAR, have begun a hunger strike in protest against plans to reduce wages by a third and the threat of job cuts.

Zlatoust is a town of nearly 200,000 people about 160km west of Chelyabinsk, a regional centre near the Ural mountains.

Protest organiser, Alexander Negrebetskikh, told *Reuters* March 1, "We began with five and then managed to persuade others. Management, using the threat of redundancies, is forcing us to sign agreements under which we must receive two-thirds of our basic salaries. This is only 5,000 roubles (US\$140)."

Management at the plant, which employs more than 9,000 people and produces steel alloys used in spacecraft and submarines, called the strike illegal and referred the case to the local prosecutor.

Companies across Russia, facing the first recession in a decade—after years of growth fuelled by high oil, gas and commodity prices—have been laying off workers, cutting wages and reducing the working week.

Steelmakers have been particularly badly affected as construction projects have ground to a halt and car sales have plummeted. Severstal, the country's largest steel producer, said March 11 it planned to cut up to 9,500 jobs in Russia.

About 800,000 Russians lost their jobs in December and January, taking the total number of unemployed to more than 6 million, or 8.1 percent of the working population.

UK: Airport baggage handlers vote on walkout

Baggage handlers at Manchester Airport could go on strike in a row

over job cuts and new shift patterns, said the BBC, March 11.

Over 100 Swissport workers based at the airport are to be balloted on industrial action this week. An imminent walkout would potentially disrupt passenger services in the lead up to, and during, the normally busy Easter holidays.

The result of the strike ballot is expected to be announced March 23.

Ireland: Nationwide strike planned

A nationwide strike is planned in Ireland for March 30. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) last week sent ballot papers to thousands of trade union members in affiliated unions such as the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU).

The threat of industrial action takes place against the backdrop of growing unrest and rising unemployment, which saw around 120,000 protestors taking to the streets of Dublin last month.

Egypt: Wave of strikes and sit-ins across six provinces

Almasry Alyoum reported March 6, that the first week of March saw half-a-dozen Egyptian provinces experience strikes and sit-ins.

In Menoufia, more than 3,000 workers of Andrama Textiles staged a sit-in inside their factory in protest against non-payment of annual bonuses amounting to 228 days wages.

A letter sent by Ibrahim Youness, head of the factory's trade union committee, to the company's administration on March 4 warns that workers are at "breaking point" and liable to "explode" at any moment because of the company's refusal to pay out the bonus. El-Dessouqy, the factory head of legal affairs, had appeared on TV program "90 Minutes" the previous evening and described the striking workers as "thugs." Prior to privatization there had been no industrial action within the factory; since then 95 strikes and protests have occurred.

In Menya, over 350 workers of Cotton Ginning have for the fourth time refused to take their February wage in protest against reducing it under the pretext of having achieved only 65 percent of the forecasted production.

The workers called for the provision of raw materials needed to operate the stalled machines and the implementation of a presidential decree—from May last year—to pay a 30 percent allowance of their basic wage. They also demanded 10 percent of company profits.

Workers said Masoud Rizq, plant director and union committee chairman, tried to talk them out of their protest, which outraged them and prompted them to continue their strike until their demands were met.

In Dakahlia, 150 female workers of Mansoura-Spain Garments went on strike in protest against suspending Factory Union Chairman Hamdi el-Maghrabi and against delaying their social allowances.

They accused the United Bank and Yousri Maghazi, the main investor in the factory and Plant Director Galal Sadek, of pressuring the workers to leave so that they could sell the plant without paying them their dues. Sadek closed the gates of the factory while the workers were inside, and denied access to journalists.

In Qena, 250 workers of Hebei Medical Supplies stayed on strike for the fourth day in protest against management's failure to pay them their January and February wages.

In Port Said, 300 workers of Eurotex Clothing staged a sit-in in protest against ill-treatment by management.

In Alexandria, scores of people staged a vigil in Saad Zaghloul Park, in

protest against the Municipality seizing their land under the pretext that it belongs to the Agricultural Reform Authority.

In Qalyubia, 3000 students from the Technology Institute went on strike in protest against Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Hany Helal and his refusal to change its name to Faculty of Engineering and Technology.

Kuwait: Port workers strike demanding higher pay

Hundreds of Kuwaiti port workers stopped work at the Gulf state's three commercial ports at the beginning of the month, demanding a wage increase and better working conditions.

Ali al-Sukoni, the head of the ports trade union, told AFP, "The response to the strike has been comprehensive and work was completely halted at the three ports."

Workers are demanding a 35 percent increase in their basic salary, "which has not been increased since 1977," Sukoni said. Almost all the 930 workers joined the partial strike.

Nigerian telecom workers barricade offices to protest planned job cuts

On March 10, junior members of staff at Nigerian telecommunication company NITEL, protested at the company's head offices in the capital Abuja against plans to make 1,500 job cuts. The newspaper *Daily Trust* reported from the scene, that policemen were struggling to maintain order in the face of an angry workforce.

The strikers had been advised by their union, the National Association of Telecommunication Employees (NATE), not to pick up dismissal notices sent by management. The workers described the job cuts as management's attempt to punish them for demanding the salaries and other allowances they had earned.

Nigerian teachers continue their strike

The strike by primary and secondary school teachers in 25 of Nigeria's 36 states is continuing, with the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) saying it will not negotiate on the issue of the Teachers Salary Scale (TSS).

The TSS, which would give all teachers a pay increase of 27.5 percent, was agreed to by state governors on August 6, 2008, after teachers had taken industrial action, but has not been implemented by most states.

The central government and state governors are now using the economic crisis to justify their refusal to honor the agreement they had made last year.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact