

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

3 April 2009

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

UK: Car factory occupation

Sacked workers from the car parts firm Visteon have been occupying three factories across the UK since April 1 in response to the announcement that 565 staff are to be laid off. Most of the jobs have been lost with immediate effect. The Belfast factory, a former Ford plant, has been placed in administration. The remaining jobs are to go at two other plants in Basildon and Enfield in England.

The action began with over 100 workers staging an overnight sit-in at the Visteon plant in Belfast and employees are continuing their protest at the factory. Around 50 workers who were sacked on March 31 occupied the roof of the Enfield plant. Others are holding a sit-in at the plant in Basildon in Essex.

The protesters claimed the company's former owner and main customer, Ford, had promised redundancy contracts that have not been honoured.

The Netherlands: Cleaners strike at Amsterdam airport

Around 500 cleaners at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport went out on strike March 30, demanding more compensation for travel costs and regular work.

The cleaners work for six different cleaning companies at the airport.

The cleaning companies took the FNV trade union federation to court to try to prevent the 24-hour strike, but on Monday the judge ruled it could go ahead.

Russia: Miners occupy pit over wage debts

Ten miners from the Chikha mine in Russia's southern Rostov region took the decision to stay underground after having finished their shift March 31, and say they will not leave the pit until they receive their wages.

The regional department for mining industry say wage debts at the mine are approaching 10 million rubles. The Interfax news agency quoted Yuri Kavunov, the regional miners' trade union deputy head, as saying that the mineworkers haven't been paid their wages for three months. He said the

miners did not receive an answer from the mine's management about the date when the debt will be paid and took the decision to sit-in as a result.

The owner of the mine is the Rusinkor company.

According to Nezavisimaya Gazeta, the miners addressed a letter to President Dmitry Medvedev that said that if the situation in the mining industry doesn't change, there will be a million unemployed miners in the country.

Tajikistan: Power plant workers stage strike over pay

A Reuters article reported that hundreds of power plant workers in Tajikistan went on strike March 27 over unpaid wages in "a rare public show of protest in a country where the government tolerates little dissent".

Around 400 workers at Sangtuda-1 hydro plant, declared a two-day strike demanding four months wage arrears.

The plant is two-thirds controlled by the Russian government and operated by it.

Sangtuda head, Rakhmetulla Alzhanov, blamed the Tajik state energy company for failing to pay its power bills on time, which he said has cut the company's main source of cash.

Tajikistan secured a \$120 million loan from the International Monetary Fund last month to help it face the economic crisis.

The International Crisis Group said in a report last month that the country, plagued by poverty, corruption and now the deepening crisis, risked turning into a failed state.

The impoverished former Soviet republic has been hit hard by the global economic crash as remittances from Tajiks working abroad, a mainstay of the economy, have drastically dried up.

Tajikistan's problems are further exacerbated by the fact that it borders Afghanistan and lies on the main drug trafficking route out of the US/NATO occupied country, which has increased corruption and instability in a country still damaged from a bloody civil war in the 1990s.

Greece: 24-hour general strike

A 24-hour nationwide general strike took place April 2 by the two largest umbrella federations in Greece—the General Confederation of Workers of Greece (GSEE) and the Civil Servants' Supreme Administrative Council (ADEDY)—that cover the public and private sector.

The strike took place under the slogan "The Employees Should not Pay for the Crisis", and closed all public services including schools and government offices. Hospitals were reduced to emergency cover only, and most transport was affected as all ferry and railway services were cancelled and air traffic controllers struck for three hours. Journalists also joined the strike.

In Athens a reported 10,000 people demonstrated and smaller protests were held in other cities around Greece.

Serbia: Factory workers start hunger strike

Around 70 workers in a Kragujevac-based factory have begun a hunger strike to protest unpaid wages and two unsuccessful privatizations.

The Partizan tanning plant's striking committee leader Svetozar Bojanić said that more than half of the 120 employees decided to refuse food "as they see no other way out of the difficult economic situation.

"Overall debt toward the workers in the past eight years is over RSD 300 million, while pension benefits have not been paid for five years", he explained.

Eighty-five of Partizan workers have been on strike since December, in dispute with the factory's majority owner on outstanding wages.

The factory was first privatized and sold in 2004. This contract was broken off three and a half years later. A new sale followed in November 2008, when workers claim that 70 percent of the company's shares were sold illegally in an emergency procedure.

Israel: Strike threat at Jerusalem hospital

The Israeli Trades Union Federation, Histadrut, is threatening to declare an industrial dispute at Jerusalem's Bikur Holim Hospital, which is owned by Arcadi Gaydamak.

The union is protesting against management's "streamlining plan", which includes 70 layoffs and an average pay cut of 20 percent for remaining employees.

Histadrut legal counsel has said that management is trying to solve its financing problems by harming the workers. Gaydamak stopped injecting capital into the hospital since the outbreak of the economic crisis. The hospital has developed an operating deficit, after a long period in which it broke even.

Iraq: Teachers protest against government threats to take over union

The Iraqi Teachers Union (ITU), held a national day of protest March 28 to oppose the Iraqi government's declared threat to take control of the union.

South Africa: Pharmacy workers strike over low pay

GM Pharmaceuticals employees in South African are on strike over low pay and poor working conditions.

On March 30, a group of strikers demonstrated outside a pharmacy owned by Ishmael Mohammed who runs a chain of pharmacies in KwaZulu-Natal, with outlets in Durban, Pinetown and Pietermaritzburg.

According to Sowetan, the strikers allege that Mohammed has assaulted them and threatened them with a firearm. Most of the workers have been working for Mohammed for over a decade, but still earn less than R700

(US\$73.50) a week.

One worker, Xolani Hadebe, told Sowetan he had been working for the pharmacist for 12 years and earned only R430 (US\$46.6) a week. He said when he asked for overtime pay, Mohammed assaulted him.

"I opened a case with police, but it has been dragging on since last year, and you can read between the lines why it is so".

Striking Nigerian teachers threatened with dismissal

Around 15,000 striking teachers in Zamfara State, Nigeria, have been threatened with dismissal by the state government unless they return to work. The teachers have been on strike for more than a week in support of their demand for implementation of the Teachers Salary Scale (TSS).

Contract teachers on strike in Niger

Around 37,000 contract teachers have been on strike in Niger for the last three months. The earnings of teachers on short-term contracts are at most only US\$160 per month—half as much as their full-time colleagues.

According to INIR, (a United Nations sponsored news agency), around 7,000 permanent staff are keeping the schools open on a part-time basis during the dispute.

The head of the union for contract teachers, Moukaila Halidou, told IRIN that the government had not honoured earlier agreements to increase their benefits and promote the workers to higher paid contracts after four years of service.

On March 22, Minister of Education Mamadou Samba claimed that the state is short of the finance needed to pay benefits because it had hired more contract workers than was initially expected.

Nigerian power workers on strike over plans for cuts

On March 27, workers at the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) went on indefinite strike in opposition to management plans for winding up its facilities. According to a report in Daily Trust, the action shut down all offices and power stations, including the PHCN, Kano zonal headquarters located at the Post Office in Kano.

Workers belonging to the National Union of Electricity Employees at PHCN told Daily Trust that their protest followed a directive from their national headquarters to resist attempts by the federal government to wind up the industry.

A spokesman for the National Union of Electricity Employees (NUEE), Nura Muhammad Garo, accused the federal government of wanting to wipe out the national headquarters of the PHCN. He said, "If they do that, we don't know what would happen to our entitlements, especially for those of us who have been in service since when the company was known as NEPA. We are afraid that what happened to our colleagues in NITEL (Nigerian Telecommunications Limited) could happen to us".



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