

# 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.*

## Romania: Thousands protest low wages

On October 7, thousands of Romanian workers from all over the country protested against low wages outside government headquarters in the capital, Bucharest. Trade unions estimated up to 20,000 workers took part in the three-hour rally, and traffic was diverted throughout the capital.

Hundreds of thousands of teachers, medical staff and other public workers also staged a one-day strike October 5.

In the face of the global economic crisis, Romania is mired in a deep recession and is dependent on a \$17.1 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund to pay a portion of public sector wages.

Unions have called for a minimum monthly salary of 650 lei (€155, US\$228) in 2010 and are demanding that the government scrap a measure forcing workers to take 10 unpaid vacation days this year.

President Traian Basescu has said there is “no clear way” for Romania to get out of the recession. “Neither the government, myself, nor the central bank can get Romania out of this crisis, because it’s not possible,” he said. “It’s a global crisis and Romania is dependent on what happens globally.”

## Bulgarian rail workers to continue strikes

Bulgarian rail workers are set to continue strike action against the Bulgarian State Railroad Company (BDZ) and the National Company Railway Infrastructure over planned job losses, delayed salaries, and attacks on social benefits. According to reports, railway workers trade unions are to meet this week to decide on dates for future industrial action. Last month the BDZ began the planned mass dismissal of workers, beginning with the sacking of 1,330. According to the Railroad Trade Union some 30,000 workers will eventually be affected by the measures. BDZ management said the restructuring and “anti-crisis measures” are necessary due to a 37 percent decrease in freight and 7.4 percent drop in passenger numbers in the first half of 2009. On September 27, over 300 rail workers gathered at a rally in the central town of Gorna Oriahovitsa, one of Bulgaria’s key railroad stations. The protesting workers issued a declaration demanding the annulment of the proposed “anti-crisis measures,” including staff reductions and closure of railroads. The statement said the measures endanger the safety and security of the railway network. Polish rail workers protest attacks on jobs and working

conditions

On October 13, several hundred rail workers protested at the headquarters of PKP Railways in Warsaw. The employees are protesting against PKP-PLK, one of the companies that comprise PKP Railways. Since the privatisation of the Polish State Railways in 2001, PKP Railways has introduced a restructuring programme leading to large-scale job losses and attacks on workers’ conditions.

The PKP-PLK plans to close 10 regional centres, which would lead to further job losses. The company maintains rail lines, the conducting of trains, setting timetables and managing yards.

## Russian sailors end hunger strike

According to *RIA Novosti*, six Russian seamen from a vessel stranded near the port of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates have ended a hunger strike over wage arrears, which they began on October 2.

The German-owned ship *Magdalena*, which was flying the flag of Antigua and Barbuda, has been anchored several miles off the coast of Dubai since early August due to an engine breakdown.

The ship was officially impounded on October 12. The vessel’s owner reportedly owes the crew \$230,000 in wage arrears.

Onboard were nine Russians, two Ukrainians, four citizens of the Philippines, and one Estonian. Six of the sailors went on a hunger strike in demand of back pay. The crew earlier asked for international aid as they were running out of food and water.

Last September, Chinese authorities impounded the *Vasily Yan* cargo ship and the *Professor Voskresensky* vessel over debts of the ship’s Russian owner, the Arctic Shipping Company. Also, around 60 Russian sailors on six fishing vessels were abandoned in Vietnam by Russian ship owners. According to press accounts the sailors have not been paid their wages for several months.

## Building workers stage wildcat strike in Hartlepool, England

On October 12, several hundred construction workers employed at an offshore site in Hartlepool, northeast England, took wildcat action in a dispute over trade union recognition. Heerema, a Dutch-owned firm, builds offshore facilities for the global oil and gas industry. Workers at the plant are demanding that the Unite trade union is recognised on the site alongside the GMB.

The dispute over trade union recognition has lasted for several weeks. The previous week, 40 pipefitters and riggers also struck for two days to demand the recognition of Unite.

The workers initially refused to return to work, ignoring demands from Unite officials to do so. In response to the strike, Bob Bolam, regional organiser for Unite, said, "From our perspective, we are encouraging them to get back to work and get back round the table so these issues can be discussed with the company and the GMB. These issues are around recognition and need to be resolved."

### **Stagecoach bus drivers in Kettering strike in pay dispute**

On October 7, bus drivers employed by Stagecoach East in Kettering, England took strike action in pursuit of pay parity with colleagues in Northampton and Bedford. Some 40 staff, members of the Unite trade union, protested outside the firm's depot on Northampton Road in the town.

Drivers at the Kettering depot are paid £9 per hour compared with their colleagues in Northampton, who are paid £9.82, and those in Bedford, who are paid £9.67. Stagecoach has offered them £9.17 per hour. Unite had originally called for a 22 percent pay rise to £11 per hour before reducing their terms to pay parity with other Stagecoach East drivers.

One driver told the local *Evening Telegraph*, "I'm very angry and disappointed with the way that management treat us. We're out there at all hours and do a good job in my view. We get treated with absolute contempt."

Following talks with management and an agreement to hold further negotiations, Unite called off a strike planned for October 12. According to the union, further strikes are set to take place on October 23 and November 2.

### **Fire fighters set to strike in South Yorkshire, England**

Fire fighters in South Yorkshire, England, are set to strike following a breakdown in talks between the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

The 24-hour strikes are scheduled to take place from 1800 BST on October 19 and October 23.

The dispute is over plans to make both day and night shifts 12 hours long.

Fire fighters currently work a pattern of nine-hour day shifts and 15-hour night shifts and oppose the planned changes as they would have a massive impact on family life and childcare.

During talks at South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service's headquarters in Sheffield, the FBU proposed to make concessions to the authority by offering 10-hour shifts. The authority maintained that it was committed to imposing 12-hour shifts, reported the BBC.

FBU members voted in favour of strike action last month after those who continued to refuse to work the 12-hour shifts were threatened with dismissal.

The South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Authority that oversees the service confirmed it still supported plans to move three hours from the night shift to the day shift to save £4.25 million.

Fire crews are also angry at management for threatening to sack them all on New Year's Day before reinstating them on new contracts with new terms and conditions.

### **UK postal workers to strike**

Postal workers have voted overwhelmingly to take national strike action in their dispute over pay and work schedules. Some 61,623 out of the 80,830 who balloted were in favour of industrial action against Royal Mail—a three to one majority.

The strike is set for next week. It follows a series of stoppages across the country involving delivery workers, as well as processing and collection sites and drivers. London in particular has been hit by a number of strikes, both official and unofficial, over the last weeks. The day after the nationwide ballot, staff at processing and collection centres in London walked out.

The government has been trying to privatise Royal Mail for several years, but was forced to shelve its plans due to the recession.

### **Egyptian doctors protest against working conditions**

*Al Masry Al Youm* reported October 15 that doctors' organisations have joined forces in protests over salaries and hikes in post-graduate fees.

A main demand of the 50-plus protesters was for the conversion of the 300 percent in bonuses they are supposed to receive into a 300 percent wage increase. The doctors also demand that medical students be allowed to apply for registration for post-graduate programs without going through a mandatory year-long internship at a hospital or clinic.

Doctors' Syndicate head Hamdy el-Sayyed told *Al-Masry Al-Youm* that he understood doctors' disappointment, "because all promises made by the government last year related to salaries and working conditions went unmet."

El-Sayyed, a member of parliament, said, "It's highly likely that we will plan a new series of protests on October 20 to demand that the government keep its promises."

### **Zimbabwe examination council strike**

Workers at the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) went on strike last Thursday in support of a pay demand of US\$400 per month for the lowest paid workers. The current level is US\$115.

Government Minister David Coltart was due to meet separately with staff and management on October 13 in an attempt to resolve the dispute. Public examinations due to take place in November could be disrupted by the action.

### **Tunisia: Elementary teachers hold one-day strike**

Elementary school teachers took strike action on October 5 in support of trade unionists, including teachers who were jailed following a protest in Gafsa in June last year. Taher Zaker, a member of the Elementary Education General Syndicate, said there had been a good response with around 60 percent of teachers taking action.

The protest march in the phosphate mining area of Gafsa in June last year led to the arrest of nearly 40 activists, who were subsequently jailed for terms of up to 10 years. The protest march had been held against

unemployment and the high cost of living.

### **Ebonyi state hospital workers resume strike action**

Unions representing doctors, nurses, midwives and other medical staff at Ebonyi State University Teaching Hospital have resumed their strike action.

The workers had suspended a three-month strike in June this year after union representatives and hospital management reached a 10-point agreement, including implementation of an improved salary structure and provision of better health care services to patients. The unions resumed the action after only two of the agreed points had been implemented since they suspended strike action in June.

### **General strike in Guinea**

Unions representing workers in the private and public sector held a two-day general strike on October 12 and 13. According to a Reuters report, it was widely supported with the streets deserted.

The strike was called following the intervention of the army at a mass opposition rally that took place on September 28 in the capital Conakry. Over 150 people were killed by the army and there were reports of soldiers bayoneting fleeing demonstrators and women being raped.



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