

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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

## Czech Republic: Hyundai workers strike against “inhuman working conditions”

According to *czechfocus.cz*, around 400 workers at the Hyundai car plant in Nosovice, near Ostrava, took unofficial strike action December 2 due to “inhuman working conditions” that include low pay and the mandatory imposition of overtime work.

Former employee Ondřej Franík told the local newspaper *Sedmicka.cz* that working at Hyundai in Nosovice was like “modern slavery. It is like in a labour camp here.”

The provision of Czech labour law, which stipulates that overtime must be used only occasionally, is regularly ignored, reported *czechfocus.cz*, with some workers on 11-hour shifts. If an employee needs to visit a doctor or if forced to go on sick leave, pay is often reduced. When working on the conveyor belt, employees are not allowed to have a water break more than twice during the whole shift, and toilet breaks are also restricted.

During the summer, heating was being tested in the factory for four days and temperature in the workshop reached more than 30 degrees centigrade. Employees were not allowed to keep water near the conveyor belt, so they were seriously dehydrated, leading one worker to collapse. A former employee who could not do a compulsory shift because he had to arrange a funeral in his family was issued with a written reprimand and deliberately put to work at a place where he was forced to stand on tiptoes all day—due to his height—to tighten screws on the undercarriage of around 400 cars.

Overtime is often imposed on employees as punishment at the last minute, and it is not possible to inform family members because employees are not permitted to use their mobile phones.

According to *Mladá fronta 7*, the current strike is unofficial because the unions say they fear that if they organised a strike the company would sue them. Hyundai launched the Czech plant a year ago, just as the global car industry was beginning to feel the effects of the economic crisis. According to AFP, the plant with 2,000 staff produced about 80,000 cars between January and September and expects to turn out 120,000 vehicles for all of 2009 against an earlier estimate of 160,000 units.

## Finland: Aviation union fined following airport strike

The Labour Court has fined the Finnish Aviation Union (IAU) €13,000 for last week’s strike at the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, reported *YLE* December 9.

The court ruled that the strike cost Finnair €6.7 million. Finnair says that the costs were estimated by the court, and final losses will be determined later.”

Finnair’s ground handling company Northport sold services to the temp agency Barona. Airport workers staged a walkout in protest at the move, which resulted in more than 200 cancelled flights and a backlog of thousands of bags at the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport. A working group has been set up to find a resolution in the dispute over baggage services at the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport. The group has until December 22 to come up with a proposal. During that time, members of the Finnish Aviation Union have agreed to refrain from industrial action.

## France: Strike shuts main Parisian tourist sites

The world’s most visited museum, the Louvre, was forced to close on December 3 due to strike action, reported *AHN*. Museum workers are demanding more state money and personnel to work in the Louvre and other world famous institutions in Paris.

The Versailles Chateau was also closed as a result of the strike, along with the Rodin Museum and the Musee d’Orsay, home to the world’s largest collection of Impressionist and post-Impressionist paintings. The Arc de Triomphe and the Gothic La Sainte-Chapelle remained closed for the second day in a week. Unofficially, workers began to strike November 23, when staff at the Pompidou Centre walked out. The museum has yet to reopen.

According to published reports, unions are protesting a government initiative that would reduce personnel by only replacing one out of every two retiring public sector employees. Talks last week between union leaders and France’s culture minister, Frederic Mitterrand, failed to end the dispute.

## Ireland: Strike action looms over government cuts

The *Irish Examiner* reported December 7 that the Irish Congress of Trade Unions is expected to organise action including strikes ahead of the budget.

“Last night the Irish Federation of University Teachers said if the government cuts the pay of its members, it will sanction an equivalent withdrawal of productivity,” it stated.

Finance Minister Brian Lenihan is to focus on slashing the public sector pay bill by €1.3 billion. Child benefit is to be cut by €16. Social welfare, excluding the state pension, will be cut by 4 percent, with payments to

young unemployed people to be cut even more.

Foreign Affairs Minister Micheál Martin said pay cuts in the public sector pay and pensions will be “tiered,” adding that all savings had to be structural. But Martin also said the government was conscious that the pension levy had already had a substantial impact on salaries, so savings would have to come from other areas as well. “We believe this budget has to be about trimming expenditure across programmes, across public pay and the welfare bill,” said Martin.

### **Italy: Fiat plant halts production due to supplier strike**

According to the *Wall Street Journal* December 3, “Striking workers at a local supplier forced Fiat SpA (F.MI) to halt production at its Termini Imerese plant in Sicily for a second day Thursday.”

Workers at a local unit of Lear Corp., which produces seats for the Lancia Ypsilon city car assembled at Termini Imerese, have taken strike action.

### **UK: Possible action over Christmas working at poultry supplier**

The Unite union web site reported December 9 that 500 meat workers from the West Midlands are holding a ballot for industrial action over Christmas working hours at Cargill Meats in Hereford.

The workers are angry that the company is forcing them to work on the December 28 Christmas bank holiday without any increase in pay. Simon Powell, regional industrial organiser, said: “So much for the season of goodwill! Due to the supermarkets’ demands, Cargill Meats is forcing staff to work on a Christmas bank holiday without any additional enhancement to bank holiday pay.”

A legal ballot giving the option to take strike action has now begun and concludes December 18.

### **UK: National Grid workers vote on strike action**

According to the UNISON union web site December 8, 1,250 members of the union working for the National Grid are “voting on a work to rule and overtime ban, in a dispute over strings attached to a pay offer, including unconsolidated wage rises and worse terms for new starters.”

Any strike action would hit the National Grid’s gas operations in England, Scotland and Wales, where maintenance workers are employed to repair leaks, maintain and replace pipelines, and bring gas into the country.

### **Egypt: Security forces intimidate textile workers**

According to *Daily News Egypt*, a strike planned by workers at the Ghazl El-Mahalla spinning factory December 7 was called off because of

intimidation by security forces and the factory’s administration, the Centre for Trade Union and Workers’ Services (CTUWS) said in a statement.

The day before, statements had been handed out calling for a strike at the factory. According to CTUWS, the company’s administration “took measures to prevent workers from exercising their legitimate right to strike.”

It sent one of the labour leaders, Faisal Laqousha, for investigation in connection with statements he made to the media which the administration alleges constitute incitement of workers to strike and compromise stability in the company.

Other union leaders were summoned by state security investigations officers and threatened that they would be detained if they went on strike, CTUWS says.

Workers had planned to strike to demand an increase in their share of profits, an equal allowance payment of LE 150 for all workers, a minimum wage of between LE 600 and LE 800, and the return of workers transferred from the Mahalla factory to other locations as punishment for their involvement in a protest held at the factory last year.

### **Gambia: Gamwater production workers strike**

Workers at the Gamwater bottling factory in Kanifing went on strike following the dismissal of one of their colleagues. The dismissed worker had raised his co-workers’ concerns with management. The workers are demanding a written contract. Workers are taken on by the company on a six-month probationary period, after which they would be given permanent contracts. But these contracts have failed to materialise.

The workers’ other concern is low wages, which they say are too little for them to be able to sustain their families. Gamwater is Gambian-owned and produces around 5,000 bottles of water a day from a well on site.

### **South Africa: Pick ‘n’ Pay workers set to strike**

Workers at the food, clothing and general merchandise chain stores Pick ‘n’ Pay are set to begin strike action. The workers belong to the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU).

The proposed strike action follows drawn-out discussions between the union and the company over allegations of racial discrimination against black workers by the company. The union complains of the inconsistency in applying disciplinary measures and that white retirees are rehired after retirement and fast-tracked to management positions while existing black workers are bypassed. The union also says the company does not provide a meaningful training programme for its employees.

The company applied to the Labour Court to try to prevent the strike, but withdrew its application. The union says 25,000 of its members in Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, Bloemfontein and Durban will be on strike.

### **South Africa: Sun International Hotel workers strike**

Workers at the prestigious Sun International Hotel chain in South Africa began indefinite strike action Friday, December 4. The company is one of the most profitable companies in South Africa. Amongst the demands of

the workers, members of the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), are a 13 percent pay increase back dated to July, the control of the use of casual labour and for a night shift allowance of R7 per hour.

SACCAWU stated that the strike had been supported by more than 70 percent of its members. The union also raised that police in the Western Cape had attacked striking workers using rubber bullets and that a shop steward had been arrested. The union was due to meet with Sun International representatives at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration on Wednesday, December 9.

#### **Nigeria: University staff unions strike to demand suspension of vice-chancellor**

Staff unions at Lagos University have taken strike action to demand the suspension of Vice-Chancellor Lateer Akanni Hussain. He is facing fraud and corruption allegations. The striking workers ignored a demand by the Lagos State Assembly that they resume work by Friday, December 4. Their continuing action led to the abandonment of a visit by an accreditation team from the National Universities Commission.



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