

# 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.*

## **Ireland: Drivers oppose changed conditions at Tesco distribution centre**

An unofficial stoppage took place December 15, by 12 drivers at the Donabate distribution centre, belonging to supermarket giant Tesco, in North Dublin.

The drivers, who used to work directly for Tesco, were angry at changes to terms and conditions following their recent move to another transport company in an outsourcing deal. The main areas of concern are the loss of a privilege card and savings scheme, changes to pension arrangements and a loss of earnings. According to RTE News, around 80 drivers in total moved to the Stobart Group as part of the changes.

## **France: Paris transport workers strike**

While strikes at museums and other attractions in Paris—due to government plans to eliminate positions in several public agencies—are beginning to end, industrial action has spread to the capital's transportation system.

On December 11, the *Lexington Destinations Travel Examiner* pointed out, "The museum worker strike virtually brought Paris travel tourism to a halt at some of its most popular attractions. Though most tours are functioning again, in many locations protesters have been attempting to block ticket booth access and discourage sightseeing, particularly at the Musée d'Orsay.... In addition, on Thursday morning, transportation work slowdowns had begun in Paris. It is estimated at this time that only about half of scheduled trains and buses on some routes are expected to run during peak hours."

French officials claim the country is losing over \$400 million each day due to the protests.

## **EU staff may strike over pay freeze**

Staff at European Union institutions are "preparing to go on strike next week in a bitter pay dispute sparked by national governments' decision to block a routine salary increase for EU civil servants," reports euractiv.com December 11.

Pay rises for EU civil servants are calculated over a 12-month period using an agreed formula which links salaries to those of officials in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK—some of the wealthier member state economies.

Public sector pay cuts introduced in recent months or planned for 2010 are not yet factored into the formula for calculating changes to pay rates. These cuts will hit EU staff pay next year. Ambassadors for most EU countries have said their governments cannot justify the pay rise at a time when national budgets are being slashed.

Civil servants across the EU are facing pay freezes, and in some cases salary cuts, due to the impact of the financial crisis. On December 10, the Irish government announced cuts of up to 15 percent for the highest-paid civil servants. In Lithuania, public sector workers went on hunger strikes earlier this year in protest over plans to reduce their salaries, while the Hungarian government has cut a "13th month" payment and instituted a pay freeze.

Staff at the European Council of Ministers, as well as civil servants at the European Commission and European Parliament, are considering industrial action.

"Extensive negotiations by diplomats in Brussels ran late into Wednesday night (9 December) in a bid to find a solution which is legally sound but satisfies governments' desire to ensure that EU workers are not seen as escaping the impact of the crisis," wrote euractiv.com.

The European Civil Service Federation explained, "Diplomats said some EU civil servants are concerned that the dispute could open a can of worms if the spotlight is turned on their generous pay and benefits, including the permanent repatriation allowance paid to civil servants—even if they have been in Brussels for 30 years."

The source added, "If the pay rise is effectively cancelled out by an increase in the crisis levy, it could affect the salaries of the new European Commission which takes office early next year. It could also mean the new EU executive begins its mandate amid major industrial unrest."

## **Spain: Mass demonstration against unemployment**

Tens of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Madrid

December 12 in protest at “the country’s record unemployment figure in the eurozone,” reports *presstv.ir*.

Protesters demanded a rise in wages and improvement of job security. The global economic crisis has had devastating consequences for the Spanish economy, especially industry and the construction sector.

At a rally following the demonstration, the leader of the United Left trade union, Cayo Lara, said, “(Prime Minister) Zapatero should be aware that Spain is not a country of wonders. It’s a country with a lot of problems and he hasn’t found a proper way to handle the crisis, a way that should take leftist measures.”

Spain’s official jobless figure is currently 19.3 percent.

#### **France: Two-day strike ends at Total refinery**

Reuters reported on a two-day strike at Total’s Feyzin refinery in southeast France that ended December 15, three hours ahead of a meeting to sign a pay deal, Total and the CGT union said.

The parties were expected to sign an agreement for a 2.7 percent pay increase. The CGT union was asking for a 2.3 percent pay rise for all workers with a minimum increase of €70 per month.

The industrial action by the workers at the 117,000 barrels-per-day refinery blocked deliveries and cut output in two different units. A three-day strike at the Gonfreville plant also ended December 14, and workers carried out an overnight strike at the La Mede refinery in southeast France.

#### **Italy: Thousands march in defence of education, jobs**

Thousands of public sector workers went on strike and held marches across the country December 10 in a nationwide protest against the government’s budget plans and education reform.

The demonstrations in Rome witnessed clashes between police and students, with police using truncheons to beat back protestors as they attempted to make their way towards the education ministry.

Demonstrations took place in Milan, Naples and other major cities, as well as in smaller towns like Modena and Reggio Emilia. The CGIL union said that up to 180,000 workers took to the streets across the country.

#### **Italy: Shipyard workers strike over jobs**

Shipyard workers across Italy staged an eight-hour strike December 10 to highlight falling work levels and increasing job losses in the industry. In Rome, members of the three metalworkers’ unions, Fiom, Fim and Uilm, gathered from yards around the country for a demonstration in the

city centre.

#### **Israel: Court secretaries strike over workloads**

IsraelNN.com wrote December 13: “As court typists returned to work Sunday, yet another group of workers in the court system—the secretaries, responsible for the processing of paperwork in the legal system—announced that they were going on strike.”

The secretaries are demanding that the government hire more employees to help them work through their large caseloads. The Histadrut union federation had asked the workers not to strike Sunday, but many of the secretaries had walked off the job anyway.

#### **South Africa: Second week of Sun International strike**

Over 3,500 workers belonging to the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) and working for the Sun International Hotel chain have now been on strike for two weeks. Among their demands are a 13 percent pay increase back dated to July and a night shift allowance of R7 (US\$1) an hour.

According to the *International Union of Food workers* (IUF), 30 strikers have been arrested during the strike. It also reported that police and private security firms have attacked pickets at Sun City, Board Walk, Fish River and other sites picketed by the Sun International workers.

#### **Nigeria: NITEL workers protest over non-payment of wages**

Workers at Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL), including those from its mobile arm MTEL, held protests outside the Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE) in Abuja for several days last week over unpaid wages covering 18 months. The government is currently trying to privatise the nationalised company—three previous attempts to sell it off have failed.

The National Council on Privatisation NCP had recently arranged for the payment of five months unpaid salary amounting to N3 billion (US\$20 million), to be made in three tranches. The NITEL workers said that they had not received any of this money and that it was being held in interest earning accounts by the BPE.

Workers came from many different parts of Nigeria to join the protest and the BPE management agreed to meet a delegation. PBE later issued a statement saying that the remaining outstanding wages would be paid once the privatisation of the company had gone through.

#### **Nigeria: Call for University staff to strike over sacking of lecturers**

Members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) last week called on its members at Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye in Ogun state, to take strike action in support of 130 lecturers recently sacked by the university.

The lecturers were sacked as part of a cost saving exercise. As well as lecturers, 868 non-academic workers face redundancy.



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