

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.

Italian Mediaset staff stage national strike

Over 3,000 workers from the country's largest commercial broadcaster, Mediaset, have carried out their first ever nationwide strike on January 10. The striking workers rallied in Milan and Rome to oppose plans to contract out the work of make-up artists.

The strike is also being supported by editorial staff and is the first of its kind for a company controlled by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. One worker told Euronews, "It's like being fired, because they're handing us to a company we know nothing about."

Belgium: Jobs protests by brewery workers

Workers at Anheuser-Busch InBev (AB InBev), the world's largest brewer, took strike action against job cuts and picketed two brewing plants in Louvain and Jupille-sur-Meuse, Belgium, on January 12.

The breweries had not been operating at full capacity for six days and could no longer supply beer to supermarkets. The Carrefour chain was quoted as saying it had enough AB InBev label beer to last only until the weekend, while at rival Delhaize stocks of the brands, which include Stella Artois and Budweiser, will run out in two or three days.

The brewer has announced it will cut 800 jobs in Europe, where it employs about 8,000 people, as beer sales decline. The losses are to be spread across Belgium, Germany, Britain, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The company intends to reduce its 2,700-strong workforce in Belgium by 263 employees.

The Belgian beer market is declining, with annual consumption in 2008 almost 20 percent lower than in 2000.

Fujitsu workers hold second strike in the UK

On January 7, 11, and 14 workers at the IT services company Fujitsu took strike action that is to continue January 15.

According to the Unite trade union, 75 percent of its members voted to strike, following an earlier protest in December—the first ever national strike to affect a UK IT company. The dispute is centred on redundancies,

a pay freeze and plans to close a pension scheme that will cost some employees up to 20 percent of their overall salaries.

Fujitsu employs around 11,500 people in the UK with sites in Bracknell, Stevenage, Manchester, Crewe, Belfast, Staines, Basingstoke, Wakefield, Sheffield, Solihull, Telford, Swansea, Slough, Lewes, Warrington, Cardiff, Londonderry, Bristol, Newcastle and London.

Fujitsu made £200 million in pre-tax profits in the UK in 2008.

Hospital staff strike in Devon, UK

Further talks are to take place between unions and employers at a Devon hospital following a two-day strike in a dispute over sick pay payments.

Almost 200 members of the Unison trade union at North Devon District Hospital, including cleaners, porters and cooks, were involved in the action, which began from midnight on January 5.

Unison said the trust and its contractor, Sodexo, had failed to give sick pay to all National Health Service workers. The trust said it would implement sick pay from January, but it has refused to pay three years' worth of sick pay demanded by the union.

Czech Republic: Unofficial strike by auto component workers

Three hundred workers took strike action over wages in an auto components factory owned by the company Grammer CZ Ltd in the northern town of Most on January 7.

The action was due to new wage levels, which for some workers means a decrease of three to five thousand crowns per month. Present wages in the factory amounted to 12 thousand to 21, 800 crowns per month (overtime bonuses and company benefits included) before taxation. Additional company benefits make up around 50 percent of wages.

Grammer CZ Ltd employs 375 workers and began operations in 1996.

French dock workers strike to protest government transfer of jobs

Dock workers at seven state-owned ports in France staged a second 24-hour strike this month on January 11. The strike was called by the CGT union in opposition to government plans to transfer 2,000 gantry crane operators and maintenance staff from port authority payrolls to private stevedores. The union is also calling for compensation for workers exposed to asbestos.

The stoppage at the largest container port, Le Havre, involved 3,000 dockworkers and port workers while Marseilles, the biggest port by tonnage came to a halt with fifteen vessels unable to move. The other ports involved were Dunkirk, Rouen, Bordeaux, La Rochelle and Nantes-Saint Nazaire.

Budapest airport ground handling staff strike

On Monday up to 40 staff employed by Malév Ground Handling took strike action at Ferihegy airport in Budapest, Hungary. The workers struck in pursuit of a retroactive 14 percent wage increase for the last year and a 20 pay increase for 2010.

The stoppage was called by the Aviation Workers' United Trade Union following a breakdown in talks with Malev GH management. The action resulted in planes taking off from the airport about 20-30 minutes late.

Transport workers continue strike in Budapest, Hungary

Transport workers began the third day of an indefinite strike on Thursday in Budapest, the Hungarian capital. The workers are employed by the Budapest Transport Company BKV.

Unions are calling for the renewal of collective work agreements, which expired at the end of last year. The strike is also being staged in opposition to planned cuts in health and pension contributions and the proposed ending of a year-end bonus.

Greece: Migrant Egyptian fish workers on strike

Around 300 Egyptian workers employed on the fishing boats of Nea Michaniona (a village near Thessaloniki, Northern Greece) blockaded the small port of the village January 6, according to clandestinenglish.

The workers have been involved in a series of one day strikes since late December in protest at the severe decrease in their income over the previous months.

The employees ended the blockade January 8, but said they will go on with their strike. Egyptian migrant workers are paid with shares of each catch's profit. These shares have been drastically reduced in value over several months.

According to the blog clandestinenglish, which covers immigrant struggles in Greece, "A worker who used to make a living and also support his family in Egypt in the recent months receives about 300-500 euro a month for working seven days a week on 24-hour shifts of very hard work (anyone who has spoken to these people knows how hard they work and under what circumstances)."

The workers have accused the owners of the fishing vessels of exploiting the method of payment to show smaller earnings in an attempt to reduce workers' pay.

According to clandestinenglish, "What the employers want through this—beyond expanding their profit margin in the short term—is to force the Egyptian workers to leave and then bring other (immigrant, obviously) workers at lower wages. Egyptian workers have been coming to work in the fishing business for 25 years now [under] the terms of a bilateral agreement between Greece and Egypt. They demand that they are paid

according to these terms."

Miners' strike ends in Montenegro

Striking miners, who had occupied a bauxite mine in northern Montenegro for eight days demanding to be paid overdue wages and other debts, ended their action on January 6.

The miners reportedly ended their strike after receiving written guarantees from Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Dukanovic that their demands would be met. "We have received the PM's written guarantee that all of our demands will be met and we came out of the pit," said the miners' representative Ratko Batricevic.

Dukanovic previously accused the Russian owner, En+ Group's Central European Aluminium Company (CEAC) of "unbelievable irresponsibility" toward the workers and "unfounded arrogance."

The Montenegrin government recently signed a settlement contract with Oleg Deripaska's company, which owns the bauxite mine and Podgorica aluminium processing plant KAP, providing the corporation with 135 million euro "for the survival of the aluminium industry in Montenegro."

The signing of the contract made the state a part owner of the mine and KAP.

Egyptian linen workers strike

Workers employed at the Tanta Linen Company in Egypt began strike action on January 9 following the sacking of the president of their factory trade union. The union representative, Salah Musallem, was dismissed after being accused of inciting workers to take strike action.

The action involved 800 workers on the morning shift. According to a press release, "They closed the company's gates and announced a sit-in at the company's yard holding signs condemning the management and the General Trade Union of Textile Industries, which denied protection to the plant union members and to its president Mr. Salah Musallem."

The release stated, "Tens of the security trucks surrounded the company in order to prevent the workers from getting out to the streets. A number of security leaders from the Security Department of Gharbiya Governorate arrived to the company and tried to convince the workers to put an end to their strike and to negotiate for the cancellation of the dismissal decision. But the workers insisted to continue their strike."

The workers at the plant ended a six-month strike in November after agreeing a deal with management to increase wages and meal allowance money. Each worker also received a lump sum of 200 Egyptian pounds.

Algeria: Steel workers strike

Over 7000 steel workers at the ArcelorMittal plant near Annaba in Eastern Algeria began indefinite strike action Tuesday, 12 January. The plant produces around three quarters of a million tonnes of plate steel and other products a year. The strike has been called after the company decided not to renovate a coking plant that had to be shut last October because of safety considerations. The company claims it is uneconomical to renovate the plant.

The union at the plant fears jobs will be lost if the renovation does not go ahead. Speaking to Reuters, union leader Smain Kouadria explained, “We will stop the strike only if the coking plant is renovated. We must defend our jobs. Arcelor, as well as the state, should invest to renovate the coking plant.” Around 300 workers were employed in the coking plant.

Nigeria: Plateau state teachers resume strike

Primary school teachers belonging to the National Union of Teachers (NUT) have resumed strike action in Plateau state. Last year the teachers were on strike from June through to October. The action was in response to the state government’s refusal to implement a promised pay rise of 27.5 percent as part of a Teachers’ Salary Structure agreement.

Speaking to reporters, union chairman Gunshin Yarnling explained that, “teachers have resolved to resume the industrial action since (State) Governor, Jonah Jang, failed to honour the gentleman’s agreement reached with teachers last year.” He added that the state had failed to pay the teachers leave pay and transport grants for the last three years, which had been part of the agreement.

Primary teachers belonging to the NUT were due to begin strike action Monday, 11 January. The week’s strike was to protest the non-payment of salary arrears covering 2007, 2008 and eight months of 2009. Shehu Alhasan, a primary head teacher and NUT national representative, said the action was because of the failure of the state to pay the arrears by the promised date of 31 December 2009.

The union has said that if the state government does not pay the arrears following the week’s strike action, further strike action will be taken in February.

Nigeria: Ebonyi state university vice-chancellor threatens to sack striking lecturers

Professor Francis Idike, vice-chancellor of Ebonyi state university has threatened to sack striking lecturers. The lecturers, members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASSU), began strike action January 5, demanding the university implement the nationally agreed Consolidated Universities Accelerated Salary Structure.

Lectures are due to start January 28. Idike has warned, “When we start our lectures...then we will take a decision.... [I]f you decide not to teach, better resign, if you fail to resign I will be compelled to ask you to resign.”

Tanzania: Bus drivers take two-day strike

Bus drivers belonging to the Tanzanian Bus Drivers’ Association (TBDA) stopped work over the weekend of 9-10 January. The action followed talks between the TBDA, government representatives and the employers but failed to reach an agreement for improved working conditions.

TBDA Chairman Chrizant Kibogoyo said drivers were being forced to work seven days a week without extra pay and that because of being overworked drivers were more likely to be involved in accidents. The TBDA also raised safety concerns alleging that the Surface and Marine

Transport Regulatory Authority was allowing bus owners to use imported trucks fitted with bus bodies.

A driver Yusuf Mbalile talking to the *Citizen* newspaper explained, “We get allowances that are low. We don’t get salaries. We are thus forced to compete for extra passengers on the way or risk going home empty-handed.”



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