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.*

Germany: National public service workers strike

Public service workers' union Verdi called strikes across the country February 3, affecting transportation networks, hospitals, waste disposal, child care centres and municipal administrative offices.

The action is part of a dispute with state employers over the demand by workers for a five percent wage increase. Verdi said it would not be calling street maintenance workers out on strike in cities still struggling to clear major roads after severe snowstorms. The strikes follow months of negotiations.

Finnish dockworkers strike

On February 2, the *Journal of Commerce* Online reported on a one-day strike by around 1,000 Finnish dockers, following a breakdown of contract negotiations. The walkout affected the loading and unloading of cargo in Helsinki, Turku, Kotka and four other ports, but passenger shipping was not affected.

The AKT Transport Workers Union has also imposed a ban on overtime work by around 3,100 permanent dockworkers and 400 temporary workers. Over 50 percent of Finland's freight traffic was at a standstill following the wildcat strike by stevedores at seven of the country's main ports.

Juha Mutru, chief executive of the Finnish Port Operators Association, told AFP, "Seven ports have informed us that operations are at a standstill and workers have gone on an illegal strike. Container traffic is more or less at a standstill, and more than half of Finland's freight traffic has ground to a halt."

Finland is heavily reliant on exports, and the country's ports handle more than 90 percent of exports and 70 percent of imports. Around half of all goods transported in and out of the country, pass through the ports of Helsinki and Kotka, where dockworkers participated in the one-day strike. As well as Helsinki and Kotka, the ports affected by the recent strike action include Turku, Uusikaupunki, Hanko, Kokkola, Naantali and Rauma.

Following a breakdown of talks, the union on Monday set a deadline of February 19 to reach an agreement on a new collective labour contract. The Finnish Transport Workers' Association has issued a strike notice saying that industrial action would begin on February 19 unless progress was made in talks over protection against dismissal. Finland's national labour arbitrator is expected to set a date soon for the resumption of negotiations between port employers and the union.

UK: Civil Service strike ballot underway

A strike ballot of 270,000 workers employed in the civil service and its related bodies, affiliated to the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) Union, began February 4 over unilateral changes to the civil service compensation scheme.

The ballot is to run until February 25 and follows the insistence of the Cabinet Office to proceed with making unilateral changes to the redundancy terms of civil and public servants, which for some workers could mean the loss of up to a third of their entitlements if they are forced out of their jobs.

The PCS said that the government is looking to save £500 million based on the number of jobs it has cut over the last three years. The cuts to the scheme could lead to the government cutting up to 100,000 jobs.

The PCS is merely arguing for its right to consultation, rather than outright opposition. Its website states that the "PCS also announced that it would be lodging papers today for a judicial review, arguing that the changes need to be implemented through agreement with the trade unions rather than imposed."

The strike ballot involves civil and public servants from across the UK including Jobcentre staff, tax workers, coastguards, border agency officials, passport workers, court staff and driving test examiners.

Irish public service job action set to escalate

Around 13,000 public service workers in the Civil, Public and Services Union (CPSU) are to be balloted for strike action over pay cuts. According to the *Irish Examiner*, "managers will not be informed when or in which part of the civil service members will act leaving them no time to put contingency plans in place."

The CPSU has also put a moratorium on its members doing any other additional work.

The Labour Relations Commission chairman Kieran Mulvey pointed out the sides had agreed nearly a billion euro in potential savings through a number of measures. Those measures included the transformation of the public service through, for example, longer working days in the health service.

Around 250,000 public sector workers are currently on a nationwide

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work-to-rule over the pay cuts announced in the government's December Budget.

Egyptian textile workers protest unpaid wages

Over 300 workers at the Tanta Flax and Oils Company demonstrated in front of the Gharbiya Governorate headquarters to demand their overdue wages. *Al-Masry Al-Youm* reported January 27 that state security forces surrounded the protesting workers and brought in vehicles to move them away after their demonstration finished.

Workers demonstrate in Cairo

Al-Masry Al-Youm reported on Municipal treasury department employees from the Nile Delta province of Kafr el-Sheikh demonstrating January 27, in front of the Finance Ministry's Cairo headquarters to demand financial remuneration on par with their ministry-employed counterparts.

Meanwhile, squatters from the Nile Delta district of Al-Manzala protested in front of the Agriculture Ministry's Cairo headquarters against the government's refusal to allow them to purchase land on which they have been settled for years, despite earlier assurances.

Two hundred workers at the Telephones Equipment Company, in the Helwan province, south of Cairo, staged demonstrations to demand three months worth of unpaid wages.

The protesting workers urged President Hosni Mubarak to intervene personally to resolve the problem. Security forces surrounded the demonstrators, preventing them from blocking the Corniche Road as they had done ten days previously when they first went on strike.

Egypt: Textile workers protest unpaid wages

Over 100 workers at textile and garments company Amonseto International continued a sit-in for the second consecutive day, February 1, in front of the Shoura Council, demanding either to return to their jobs or the closure of the company.

Around 1,200 workers employed at one of Amonseto's 12 factories (formerly employing 5,000 in total) say that they have not received their pay since the owner, Adel Agha, fled the country in 2007. The Ministry of Manpower stopped paying them their monthly aid shortly after.

Agha was charged with evading customs and sentenced to six years in prison. Three years following the sentence, he was declared innocent. According to one of the workers, Agha was indebted to Banque Du Caire for LE 1 billion, and so to "pressure the government" he cut the workforce and stopped paying bills.

"The company used to run 12 factories employing more than 5,000 workers. He stopped paying allowances and incentives and then fled the country from Borg Al-Arab airport," Ibrahim Othman, treasurer of the Workers' Syndicate's committee at the company told *Daily News Egypt*.

Workers established their own administration to run the company, but according to the paper were soon unable to handle the mounting demands to pay taxes and cover their electricity, water and gas bills.

In June 2008, the Ministry of Electricity cut the power to the factories and the Prosecutor General appointed three commissioners to run the company. "They came once a week and were paid LE 10,000 a month. They cancelled transportation, didn't attempt to solve the debt problem and didn't even negotiate with the bank," said one worker, Mohamed Hussein.

According to Othman, the workers appealed to all officials asking for a two-year loan, which they failed to secure, leading to the closure of factories over 13 months ago.

When the workers began to organize monthly protests in front of the Shoura Council, the Ministry of Manpower agreed to pay them monthly "handouts" for 10 months in May 2009, but stopped delivering the payments two months before the agreed cut-off date. Workers say they can't work elsewhere because they don't have official documents.

Uganda: Flower workers strike

Last week workers at the Rosebud flower firm took strike action. Rosebud is one of Uganda's largest flower exporters. It has around a third of Uganda's market and sends out nine million stems a month, mainly to Europe. The firm employs around 900 workers.

The workers took strike action and picketed the Entebbe firm's premises over the death of one of their colleagues, Safari Mazirani, after he was sprayed by chemicals used in the production of the flowers. The workers were also demanding a 60 percent pay increase. Speaking to the Ugandan *Daily Monitor*, Betty Naiga explained, "I am renting a house for Shs 30,000… but I am earning a daily wage of Shs 2,000".

The workers were attacked by police and 10 were arrested.

Amongst their other grievances is the lack of drinking water and protective garments. The workers had petitioned the government the previous week over low pay and poor conditions at the firm. The paper reported that following the action at a meeting between management and unions, the company agreed to a 10 percent pay increase.

See You Tube video at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TT0WZgVJUDY

Zimbabwean nurses at private hospital stop work

Nurses working at the St Anne's private hospital in Harare stopped work for a few hours last Friday to demand a doubling of their current salary. The lowest paid nurses are on US$400, while those at some other private hospitals and clinics receive around US$800. Three of the nurses taking part in the action were suspended. Following the strike, the *Standard* newspaper reported negotiations were due to take place Monday 1 February.

Nigeria: State workers strike

Workers employed by the central Nigerian Nasarawa State government began all out strike action on Monday to protest a doubling of the tax deduction on pay from 5 percent to 10 percent by the State government. The indefinite strike action was decided on following an emergency meeting of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), the Trade Union Congress and the Joint Public Service Negotiation Council, which took

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place in the state capital Lafia.

Following a rally in Lafia the action by workers began in all the 13 local government areas and 16 Development areas. Many of the workers are represented by the Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees. All local government offices were picketed and according to the Nasarawa State NLC Secretary, Salihu Eladoga, staff in universities, colleges and the Association of Resident Doctors were due to join the action Tuesday 2 February.

Moroccan transport unions pledge action over new highway laws

Around 50 unions and labour associations representing transport workers have pledged strike action Monday 8 February to protest the government plan to introduce a new highway code ratified by parliament on January 14.

The unions covering taxi, lorry and bus workers say the new code, which is supposedly designed to lower accidents and keep order on the road, will include very heavy fines and severe custodial sentences. The group of unions is also calling on the government to keep to a previous promise to give transport workers a higher wage, better medical cover and retirement benefits.

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