

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.

France: Strike at oil refineries over planned Dunkirk closure

Five unions, the CGT, Sud Chimie, FO, CFE-CGC and the CFTD, have called an open-ended strike at Total SA's French oil refineries on February 17. The strike is to oppose the corporation's plans to close down its Dunkirk refinery, reports *Reuters*.

The news agency also reported that workers are expected to block shipment of oil product supplies. A strike was staged last month, affecting five of Total's six refineries, to protest against the possible shutdown of the 137,000 barrels-per-day Dunkirk plant, which employs over 600 workers.

Analysts have commented, "News of a definitive closure could have triggered a political storm in France, weeks before regional elections in March, as the government has made jobs a priority in the face of an unemployment rate of around 10 percent."

Total is restructuring its French refineries as it has struggled to sell refined oil products in Europe and export gasoline to the US, where demand for auto fuel is decreasing. France exports a third of the gasoline it produces and imports a quarter of the diesel used by three quarters of French motorists.

France: Strike halts production at world's largest steelmaker

Steel production was halted at the plant of the world's largest steelmaker, ArcelorMittal, in Fos-sur-Mer, southern France, on February 4, due to strike action over workers' pay.

The dispute arose in response to the plant administration's wage increase offer of 1 percent, against the 5 percent demanded by the workforce.

The Fos-sur-Mer blast furnace was restarted on February 5, due to safety reasons. However, production at the plant has been disrupted since activity at other facilities of the plant was also halted, a union representative stated.

ArcelorMittal's plant employs about 3,100 workers and produces 4.5 million metric tons of flat carbon steel a year.

Germany: Public sector workers' strike over pay continues

The local.de reported that public sector workers' union Verdi called for strikes in northern Germany February 8, as their wage dispute with state and municipal employers continues.

The dispute involves around 2 million workers who are demanding a 5 percent wage increase. Public sector workers from different localities in Lower Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, Mecklenburg Western-Pomerania and Rhineland-Palatinate walked off their jobs as the morning shift began.

In Hannover, where more than 10,000 public sector workers are expected to attend a rally next week, 1,000 public transport workers joined the action. Public transport was also severely disrupted in Mainz.

Kindergarten, hospital and municipal administrative workers also took part in the strikes. A total of 25 flights to and from Munich airport were cancelled February 8 due to participation in the strike of public sector ground staff and maintenance workers.

Ireland: Racecourse officials to strike over cuts

The *Guardian* reported February 9 that Mandate, the trade union that represents Irish racecourse officials (including stewarding and integrity staff), has called a strike in a dispute with the Irish Turf Club over proposed cuts to wage and integrity budgets for 2010. This follows significant cuts in the funding that the sport receives from the Irish government.

The union says the Turf Club's proposals mean that "the vast majority of officials will see an approximate 36.5 percent cut in income."

Wales: Port strike threat over pension changes

The threat of strike action by Milford Haven Port Authority (MHPA) pilots and launch crews over "significant changes" to their final salary pension scheme could have serious implications nationally. The Unite trade union regional officer, Allan Card, confirmed that up to 50 workers at the authority had balloted "very strongly" in favour of taking industrial action.

The port workers include pilots who navigate LNG and oil tankers into the haven safely.

Preseli Pembrokeshire MP, Stephen Crabb, said, "The threat of any industrial action at the port which may disrupt oil and gas deliveries will obviously have very serious implications UK-wide."

Italy: Fiat workers strike against plant shutdown

AFP reported February 3 on Fiat workers throughout Italy striking to protest the planned shutdown of a car plant in Sicily, “as a minister hinted incentives for the auto industry could be stopped in 2010.”

A Fiat spokesman said 14 percent of the 32,000 workers on duty took part in the four-hour strike against the planned shutdown at the end of 2011 of Termini Imerese, a plant in Sicily that employs 1,400 workers.

Local representatives of the Fiom labour union, the largest within Fiat, said the strike involved 80 percent of workers in Termini Imerese and between 50 and 70 percent of workers at the Mirafiori plant in northern Italy.

Fiat chief executive Sergio Marchionne (now also the chief executive of Chrysler) confirmed the decision to shut down the Sicilian plant. Economic Development Minister Claudio Scajola said the government was “evaluating” the possibility of halting all state incentives in 2010, including those in the auto sector that are crucial for Fiat.

Fiat recently announced it would halt production at all Italian plants for two weeks starting on February 22 because of a fall in new car orders, a measure that will place 30,000 workers on unemployment benefits.

According to *Reuters*, Fiat refused to reconsider plans to shut down the plant during government-mediated talks, spurring an impromptu stoppage at the factory. As news from the meeting reached Sicily, workers at the plant left assembly lines to protest at the factory gates, stopping production.

Fiat has offered to move Panda production from Poland to Pomigliano, Italy, in return for shutting Termini. A source told Reuters last week that the government may be willing to offer incentives in exchange for the transfer of jobs to Italy.

Israel: Defence workers strike over pay and conditions

IsraelNN.com reported February 7, that “the workers at the Shin Yud Resh Nun company’s Shikmiot post exchanges at Israel Defense Forces bases announced on Sunday that they would be going on an open-ended strike on Monday.”

The company is a subsidiary of the Association for the Soldier. The employees are protesting against the failure of talks on a contract that will give them job security. They say working conditions have declined in the last year.

The workers recently joined the Histadrut trade union federation. The federation says that management has stopped paying overtime and compensating workers who have to travel long distances to work. Two thirds of staff need the National Insurance Institute to compensate for wage levels, in spite of a commitment in the current contract to pay the minimum wage.

Egypt: Textile workers protest over unpaid wages

Amid a strong security presence, around 400 workers from the Tanta Flax and Oils Company staged a sit-in February 8 in front of the Egyptian Council of Ministers’ Cairo headquarters.

Workers say they had not been paid their wages by Abdel Elah el-Kahki, the Saudi investor who in 2005 took over the formerly state-owned

company. El-Kahki sacked their trade union representatives before closing down the company.

The workers accused the government holding company of having sold off its affiliate without guaranteeing workers’ rights, holding Investment Minister Mahmoud Mohi Eddin responsible for violations practiced by foreign investors that had purchased Egyptian companies.

Iran: Workers’ protests reported in several cities

According to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) on February 6, a “series of labour protests have taken place in several Iranian cities this week.”

“About 1,300 workers at a pipe factory in Saveh, about a 100 kilometres southwest of Tehran, held a work stoppage for several hours earlier this week after not receiving their paycheques for more than a month.

“Some 400 workers at a factory in the western city of Arak held a demonstration this week because many people said they had not been paid in six months.

“An estimated 700 workers at the Alborz Tire factory in Eslamshahr, outside of Tehran, also held protests last week over salary delays.”

RFE/RL also reported “150 municipal workers in the far western city of Andimeshk protested 13 months of salary delays” on February 3.

Swaziland: Court assessors strike

Assessors working at the Swaziland Industrial Court took strike action last Friday in support of their claim for non-payment of wages for the months of December and January. The assessors have been in talks with the government over the last 10 years regarding their terms and conditions. The assessors met on Monday to discuss their action and said they would not return until the arrears were paid.

Kenya: Mortuary workers strike

Thirty-six mortuary workers at the main Nairobi mortuary, members of the Local Government Workers’ Union, took strike action last Friday, February 5. The action was over two month’s non-payment of a special allowance. The workers resumed work after seven hours, following the intervention of the mayor who promised the workers would receive the arrears. The workers said they would resume the action if the promise were not kept.

Kenya: Port workers strike

The strike of over 2,000 loaders at the port of Mombassa went into its

third day on Wednesday, February 10. The workers are demanding a payment of Sh17 (US\$0.2) for each bag unloaded. The current rate is Sh11 (US\$0.14). They also want an overtime rate of Sh25 (US\$0.3) an hour to be paid.

Zimbabwe: Public sector workers strike

Strike action begun by public sector workers on Friday, February 5 continues. They struck in pursuit of a monthly salary of US\$600. The current monthly salary is around US\$150. The workers taking action include teachers, court workers, health workers and civil servants.

The strike began after negotiations with the government, who had made a 10 percent pay offer, broke down. The unions say that the high costs of utilities charged by government parastatals means their members need US\$600 a month just to subsist. Rallies were held this week in Bulawayo and Gwenu. Amongst the unions taking part are the Zimbabwe Teachers' Association and the Progressive Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe.

Nigeria: Oil workers strike in defence of sacked casual workers

Oil workers belonging to the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) and the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) unions and working for the ExxonMobil subsidiary, Mobil Producing Nigeria (MPN), took two days strike action last week, closing down many of the company's installations. The workers also protested at the company's main export terminal.

The strike action was to oppose the sacking of around 100 casual workers who had supported previous union actions. Bayo Olowoshile, a PENGASSAN spokesman, explained that MPN "engages in medium and long-term casualisation of highly skilled, professional and experienced nationals... This amounts to the flagrant contravention of the laws of ... Nigeria."

Nigeria: Teachers in strike action

Primary teachers belonging to the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) in Ogun state began all-out strike action Wednesday, February 10. The action is in response to the refusal of the 20 local council areas that make up the state to implement the Teachers Salary Structure (TSS). Wale Oyenini of the NUT said the teachers would not return until the 27.5 percent increase represented by the TSS and approved by the state government was paid.



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