

# Workers Struggles: Europe, the Middle East and Africa

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

## British power station workers walk out over safety

Up to 300 construction workers at a Staythorpe power station in Nottinghamshire took unofficial strike action February 16 after a health and safety breach involving scaffolding.

## Union offers to suspend Welsh port strike

The Unite union says it has offered to suspend a strike by port workers after facing a possible High Court injunction over the industrial action. The walkout involves around 50 port pilots and launch crews staff at Milford Haven, Pembrokeshire. The largest port in Wales, it is the UK's sixth largest port and home to two terminals that supply natural gas to the UK network after it has been shipped from abroad.

The workers were balloted over a walkout February 11 and 12 in a dispute over the pension scheme, which has an apparent deficit that has grown from £2.5 million to more than £9 million within less than three years. Talks continue between the parties but the port authority said it believed there were "some inconsistencies" when port workers were balloted.

## Strike threat at *Financial Times*

National Union of Journalists (NUJ) members at the *Financial Times* (FT) have threatened to take industrial action following a proposal by the paper that four journalists working on FT Chinese move to China and work for reduced salaries.

According to the NUJ, the FT journalists have been told they face possible redundancy if they decline to move to China. Two of the four journalists affected are British citizens.

One of the four journalists working on FT Chinese said in a letter to NUJ colleagues, "Last year we finally broke even, which is absolutely an achievement worth celebration. However, just as we were contemplating what to do to further enhance our position, there came this horrible and stunning decision of redundancy from the management. Needless to say, it was a tremendous shock to the entire team. This reminded us of a very old Chinese saying: 'kill the donkey after it has done its job at the mill'."

The journalist who wrote the letter said that Chinese law forbids Chinese nationals from working for foreign media inside the country. Journalists working on FT Chinese are reportedly already on less pay than journalists working elsewhere on the FT.

## National gallery staff in London to strike over pay

Security staff walked out over two days this week at the National Gallery in London in a dispute over pay. Hundreds of visitors were ushered out of the gallery into Trafalgar Square as workers left their posts on February 16 and 17.

The industrial action, in protest at a 2.5 percent pay award, was organised by the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCSU) after 82 percent of members voted in favour.

The union claims the wages are lower than any other museums and galleries in London. The majority of warders are paid less than £15,000 a year—the recommended London "living wage"—after working 50 to 60 hour weeks. Many have to rely on overtime and weekend working to top up their basic pay, while others have been forced to take up a second job.

## Finnish icebreaker crews issue strike notice

The *Helsinki Times* reported February 15 that the Finnish Seamen's Union has issued a strike notice to include sailors and crew on icebreakers, multi-purpose vessels and archipelago supply vessels. A pay and conditions agreement covering icebreaker crews will expire at the end of the month.

In accordance with industrial action law the strike has been scheduled to begin in a fortnight's time. Talks between the union and government-owned Arctia Shipping, which operates icebreakers and supply vessels, have stalled. The Transport Agency said the strike would bring all shipping to a complete standstill.

The Finnish icebreaker fleet has been very actively engaged this winter, with temperatures staying well below zero Celsius even in southern parts of the country. The thickness of sea ice is set to rise further over the next few days. The agency added that in the event of industrial action it could request assistance from Sweden.

## Stevedore strike hits Finnish ports

Ports across the country are set to grind to a halt March 4 as a strike involving some 3,100 permanent and 400 temporary stevedores takes place over lack of agreement on a collective labour contract. The port strike was originally scheduled for February 19 before being cancelled following an intervention by the Economic Affairs ministry.

On February 2, wildcat strikes by stevedores at seven Finnish ports brought half of the country's freight traffic to a standstill. Around 80 percent of all goods transported in and out of export-reliant Finland transit through the country's ports.

### **Finnish transport workers strike**

Transport workers across the country are set to strike February 21 over a wage dispute. Around 40 divisions of the Finnish Transport Workers' Union (AKT) are expected to participate in the walkout. The action will severely affect the public transport system, including aircraft refuelling at Helsinki-Vantaa Airport (HEL), which serves the capital Helsinki.

### **French refinery workers strike over plant closure**

Oil refinery workers at Total SA began a 48-hour strike February 17 to protest the planned permanent closure of crude processing operations at an idled plant near Dunkirk in northern France. The industrial action is affecting all six of Total's French refineries with a "massive following" and will lead to lower output and shipments, Christian Votte, a representative at the CGT union, said from the Gonfreville refinery.

The affected plants were already at "minimum production levels," Total spokesman Michael Crochet-Vourey said. On February 16, around 100 workers occupied the administrative offices of the refinery near Dunkirk.

"The management's offices were invaded this morning," Maxime Delanoix, head of communication at the Dunkirk refinery told Reuters by telephone. "There are about 30 people occupying the offices at the entrance of the site but they allow workers who are not striking to come and go," she said.

The Paris-based company lost about 100 million euros (\$137 million) a month at its six French plants in the past nine months, Michel Benezit, head of refining, said last week. The refiner, Europe's largest, plans to reduce global processing capacity by about a fifth, or 500,000 barrels a day, between 2007 and 2011. Total suspended refining at the Dunkirk plant in September after halting a crude-distillation unit at its biggest French refinery at Gonfreville in Normandy a month earlier. Total has about 370 employees at Dunkirk and about 400 sub-contractors.

### **France: workers at IKEA go on strike**

On February 13, hundreds of staff at IKEA, the world's biggest furniture retailer, went on strike at 23 of its stores to demand better pay and conditions. Reuters reports that up to 1,000 staff supported the action.

The strike is believed to be the biggest to hit the French operations of the Swedish firm, which have traditionally cultivated an "employee-friendly" image. IKEA, which sells low-price, self-assembly furniture in 25 countries, has had to make staff cuts worldwide and slow down expansion in response to the global economic crisis.

Workers want a 4 percent pay rise, compensation for staff working outdoors and more recruitment to tackle staff shortages. The management has proposed only one percent across the board and another one percent on merit. IKEA employs 9,000 workers in France in 26 stores, and 123,000 worldwide in 267 stores in 25 countries, with another 34 operating under franchise. In June, it said it had slashed 5,000 jobs to cope with the drop in demand brought about by the global economic crisis.

### **Lufthansa pilots vote for strikes**

Pilots at the country's main airline, Lufthansa, voted February 17 to stage their biggest strike action in almost a decade over jobs security. Over 93 percent of the 4,500 pilots at the airline, one of Europe's "big three" with Air France-KLM and British Airways, opted to stage four days of industrial action starting at midnight on February 22.

Talks collapsed in December, with the Cockpit union demanding a 6.4 percent pay increase and commitments that pilots would keep their jobs as the firm shifts passengers to cheaper foreign affiliates. The airline said that the union was also making a demand for greater say on management decisions, which "cannot be accepted."

The strikes will also affect Lufthansa Cargo, one of the world's biggest freight carriers, and Germanwings, which operated around 800,000 flights last year. Britain's national carrier is currently slashing almost 5,000 jobs. Air France-KLM is cutting 2,700 staff and Lufthansa is cutting costs by a billion euros (\$1.4 billion).

Lufthansa, which employs around 100,000 people, was hit by the worst strike in its history in 2001. The Rheinische Post cited an official at Cockpit as saying: "It's going to be around the same scale this time. Small warning strikes are insufficient. The differences are too fundamental this time."

### **Italian fashion workers strike**

Workers at the country's Mariella Burani Fashion Group (MBFG) took industrial action February 12, the deadline for the Burani family to show it could spearhead a financial rescue of the debt-ridden company. The workers demonstrate outside Mariella Burani headquarters.

The strike follows a Milan court ruling February 11 declaring bankruptcy on the family's Burani Designer Holding (BDH), which indirectly controls MBFG. MBFG employs around 2,200 workers. MBFG, whose shares have been suspended since September, has nearly 500 million euros (\$683.6 million) in debt and has been in talks with banks for months to seal a "restructuring" deal.

### **Spanish workers demonstrate against plan to raise retirement age**

In the first real sign of industrial unrest since the government announced austerity measures to rein in its huge budget deficit, nationwide demonstrations have been called against a plan to raise the retirement age from 65 to 67 years. General Workers Union leader Candido Mendez said that the first protests will be held February 23 in about 10 cities including Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia. In most cases, the proposed changes would mean a smaller pension.

reinstatement of nine workers, who they say were unfairly dismissed.

### **Ireland: striking workers to begin hunger strike**

Workers at Green Isle Foods in Co Kildare, who have been involved in a strike at the plant for the last six months, are to begin a hunger strike from this week. The *Irish Times* reported that the Technical, Electrical and Engineering Union (TEEU) said shop steward Jim Wyse would commence a hunger strike February 17 in protest at what it said was the continued refusal of Green Isle Foods to accept Labour Court recommendations for the settlement of the lengthy dispute over the dismissal of union members.

The union said that if the company continued to refuse to accept the court's recommendations or engage in talks with the TEEU a second member would join the hunger strike on February 24, followed by another worker each Wednesday.

A number of employees were allegedly sacked after a confidential file was sent in error to a staff member. The file contained restructuring proposals, and the employee shared that information with staff.

### **Irish public service union wants to “re-engage” government**

Trade union leaders are to defer any major escalation of industrial action in the public service for up to a month to allow the government to decide if it wants to “re-engage” in talks, reports the *Irish Times*. The current, month-long, low-level campaign of action in protest at pay cuts introduced in the budget is to continue. This week, lower-paid civil servants put in place a ban on answering phones across all government departments.

### **Egyptian textile strike continues into second week**

On February 15, sit-in by workers at Tanta Flax and Oils Company in Cairo entered its eighth day. Around 50 women and children joined the roughly 300 men who are demanding that the company either be run properly or that it is closed and they receive their financial entitlements, according to *Daily News Egypt*.

Workers have criticized the role that the Egyptian Federation of Trade Unions and the manpower ministry have played in the dispute. One worker, Gamal Othman, speaking to *Daily News Egypt* outside the Cabinet building where the sit-in is taking place, was very critical of statements made by Manpower Minister Aisha Abdel-Hady on “El-Beit Beita”, a talk show broadcast on state-controlled Channel 2 on Monday.

Abdel-Hady alleged that “outside political forces” are directing the strike and sit-in with “political objectives”. “Political forces didn’t take workers from their homes and bring them here—if there are people helping the workers with food and so on, well that’s because they’re sleeping in the street,” Othman responded, adding that the government wants workers to “get fed up and leave. We won’t leave though. We’re determined. These are all just attempts to break up the sit-in.”

In a statement issued on Sunday the Tanta workers criticized the failure of the minister to mention that the Saudi investor who bought the formerly public sector company in 2005 “failed to respond” to the demands they made during last year’s five-month strike. Workers went on strike over demands that included an annual pay raise amounting to 7 percent and the

### **Zimbabwean public sector strike**

The strike by public workers for a monthly wage of \$US600 is now in its second week. Those on strike include teachers, hospital workers and civil servants. Some unions have become concerned over the actions of Zanu PF militia and security staff who have given active support to the strike. According to Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) leader, Takavafira Zhou, Central Intelligence Officers and other security forces personnel have appeared at some schools and threatened teachers and head teachers not supporting the strike. Zhou has said his union may withdraw support from the strike.

The Zimbabwe Teachers Association (ZIMTA) has also expressed concern at the “politicization” of the strike. Zanu PF would seem to be using the dispute to destabilize Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai and the MDC. However, the strike remains solid so far but the government has refused to negotiate with the striking unions.

### **Nigerian media workers threaten to strike**

Workers belonging to the Radio, Television, Theatre and Arts Workers Union of Nigeria (RATTAWU) issued an ultimatum February 3 threatening strike action in 21 days. The union called on the government to set up a negotiating committee charged with producing a new salary structure for its members.

The union said failure to set up such a committee within the 21 days given would result in its members taking all-out strike action. The workers are employed in news agencies such as Voice of Nigeria and News agency of Nigeria as well as other broadcast and news agencies.

### **Kaduna state medical staff strike**

Health care staff including doctors at nearly 1,000 primary healthcare centres and 28 general hospitals in the north-central Nigerian state of Kaduna began strike action Sunday, February 14. The action is over the failure of the state government to implement an improved pay and conditions package agreed last November. Part of the agreement was a 350 percent pay increase to bring healthcare workers in line with that paid in other Nigerian states.

The Kaduna State Health Workers Consultative Forum, representing the unions involved in the strike, say there has been strong support for the action amongst workers. The state government has had to rely on student doctors and medically trained military staff to try and maintain a service.

### **Nigeria: Non-academic staff launch five-day strike**

Workers belonging to the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASU) began five days of strike action on February 16. The union has called for action to be taken at all tertiary education institutions across

Nigeria. The action is over the non-implementation of a new salary structure originally negotiated with the government back in 2008.

The action was agreed at an emergency meeting in Abuja at the weekend at which 80 NASU branches were represented. The union has said if there is no response from the government after the strike, it would initiate indefinite strike action. Other unions including the Academic Staff Union of Research Institutes have said they will join in the strike action.

### **Ogun state court staff resumes suspended strike action**

Court workers in the state of Ogun this week began strike action in pursuit of the implementation of a new salary structure. The workers belong to the Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria (JUSUN).

The workers suspended previous strike action last November on the basis of an agreement with the state government that the new structure would be implemented from January this year. Following failure of the state government to keep its agreement, the union recommenced the strike action. The union has posted pickets at all courts and according to the union chairman the action has succeeded in bringing the work of the courts to a halt.



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