

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.

Russia: Protests against falling living standards

On March 7, an estimated 2,000 protesters marched through the central Russian city of Penza's city centre to demonstrate against falling living standards.

A report of the rally on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) cited one protester, Tatyana, a 50-year-old preschool teacher, who "like millions of Russians ... had been bracing for the annual hike in utility tariffs that comes with the New Year. But her bill for January exceeded her worst nightmares. It had jumped 25 percent from the previous month, eating up as much as two-thirds of her salary."

Tatyana now has to spend 5,000 rubles (\$168) per month on water, gas and electricity. This leaves her just 2,300 rubles (\$77) with which to feed her two teenage children and her husband, an invalid whose health prevents him from working.

"I'm in a hopeless situation," said Tatyana, who was afraid to give her last name. "I can't bear it anymore. I need to do something about it and that's why I went to the protest. I saw that people had already been driven to despair..."

"I have great difficulties in paying for my flat. Salaries here are low and tariffs for utilities are very high. I grew up in Soviet times, and we didn't have such problems. I'm really scared for my children."

RFE/RL said that nervous city authorities did their best to deter residents from attending the rally, even offering free entrance to the local zoo, free city excursions, and public lectures on how to cut utility costs. The rally through Penza was the latest in a series of demonstrations that have taken place across Russia in recent weeks, including in Samara, Irkutsk and Archangelsk. The demonstrations have protested against low pay, mounting unemployment, police brutality, and increasing popular anger at corrupt government on both the local and federal level. The largest demonstration took place last month in the Baltic city of Kaliningrad, which attracted around 10,000 protesters.

The demonstration is to be repeated on a national scale when Kaliningrad becomes one of at least 15 cities to stage coordinated protests on March 20.

On March 7, during his concert in Moscow, veteran rock star Yury Shevchuk said, "The rich are becoming even richer, the poor even poorer. Corruption is total; everyone is stealing. The system has built a brutal, cruel and inhumane government in our country. People are suffering, not

only in prisons and camps, but in orphanages and hospitals as well."

RFE/RL noted, "The recent protests are a notable shift from the public passivity of the early and mid-2000s, when the country was enjoying an unprecedented wave of stability and economic prosperity."

Italy: National protest strike

On March 12, a national protest strike called by Italy's biggest union, CGIL, against the Berlusconi government and in defence of jobs, grounded dozens of planes and brought the transportation system to a virtual standstill.

Workers staged a march in Rome and other cities to demand job protection in the face of the economic crisis. The four-hour stoppage also caused traffic gridlock in various other cities.

Hospital and school workers were staging an eight-hour strike, causing delays and forcing some schools to shut, according to the ANSA news agency.

Ireland: Emergency service workers to strike

Firefighters in Dublin have voted for strike action in a dispute over pay and conditions, triggering what could be the first all-out strike in the fire service in more than 20 years.

The action centres on the growing number of unfilled vacancies in the service, leading to unsafe conditions and pay cuts.

Dublin could be left without fire and ambulance services within a month. The action would involve a complete stoppage of fire and ambulance services and would be likely to cause the closure of Dublin airport and regional airports. Under pressure from its membership, the SIPTU union's national full-time fire officers' committee has agreed that members around the country will withdraw their services in support of the strike.

There are nearly 1,000 firefighters in the Dublin area and another 350 situated near the capital. In addition to the pay cuts, 108 members retired last year, around 30 so far this year. There have been no new recruits over the last two years. The capital has only 19 ambulances to serve a population of 1.3 million, with one firefighter for every 1,300 members of the public. This compares with one to 800 in cities in Britain.

Ireland: 48-hour hospital strike set to go ahead despite talks

A planned 48-hour strike by hospital workers, over pay and the possible outsourcing of jobs, is set to go ahead next month, despite the resumption of pay talks this week. However, Irish Congress of Trade Unions President Jack O'Connor said there would be no escalation of industrial action while talks were continuing.

The industrial dispute involves the Dublin Academic Teaching Hospitals. The public hospitals to be affected are St. James's, St. Vincent's, Connolly Memorial, Mater, Beaumont, Tallaght and St. Colmcille's in Loughlinstown.

Around 4,500 lower-paid staff in the seven hospitals—including porters, catering personnel, security, healthcare assistants and supervisors—will strike from April 7 to April 9.

Speaking on RTÉ Radio One's "This Week" programme, O'Connor made clear he did not want the strike to go ahead. He said an opportunity was being afforded by the talks to forge an agreement. There was a period between now and the strike date that "affords an opportunity to see if a meeting of minds can be arrived at." That was the reason why such a long period of notice was served, he added.

Meanwhile, workers protested outside Mount Carmel Hospital for a second day March 15 over pay cuts. The union says cuts of up to 6 percent were imposed on staff at the hospital without any consultation. The action will involve radiographers, laboratory scientists, as well as nursing and clerical staff.

Ireland: Fast food workers protest

Workers in the fast food industry held a protest in Dublin March 15 over attempts to cut wages in the sector, according to the *Irish Times*.

The Restaurant Workers Action Group (RWAG) staged a protest outside Supermac's restaurant on O'Connell Street. Supermac's is part of the Quick Service Food Alliance, which also represents McDonalds, Burger King, Abrakebabra and various independently run coffee shops, restaurants and sandwich bars across the country. It is mounting a legal challenge to the JLC (Joint Labour Committee) system, which sets wages for the restaurant industry.

The RWAG, which was established by the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI), said that although Supermac's saw its pre-tax profits quadruple last year, "it is joining other restaurants in challenging wage protections for its workers."

"Restaurant owners and industry groups have been calling for the reduction of worker protections, including a €1 per hour cut in the national minimum wage; a weakening of the standards laid out in the JLC; and a challenge to the right of the JLC to determine working conditions," it said in a statement.

Gul Gencoglu, a restaurant worker in Naas, County Kildare, said that if her wages were cut, she would not be able to pay her rent. "I would have no choice but to turn to social welfare for assistance. This is not what I want. I want to work. I want to have decent conditions. I don't want anything more than that."

Director of MRCI Siobhain O'Donoghue said the organisation had heard from hundreds of restaurant workers reporting unfair treatment and conditions of exploitation over the years.

UK: Network Rail strike vote

The web site of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport

Workers (RMT) confirmed March 11 that members on Network Rail maintenance had voted by 77 percent for strike action and by 89 percent for action short of a strike over plans by the company to axe up to 1,500 safety-critical jobs and to rip up national agreements on working practices.

The RMT refused to rule out a bank holiday strike by thousands of Network Rail staff, and they could be joined by 5,500 signal workers whose ballot result is to be announced this week.

Bob Crow, the RMT general secretary, left open the option of an Easter national rail walkout and called on Network Rail to hold further talks about changes to working practices.

According to the *Guardian* newspaper, Network Rail believes it can withstand a maintenance strike for at least a week, with some branch line closures, before services are disrupted due to safety measures such as speed restrictions. However, the company admitted this week that a signallers' strike could bring the busiest sections of the network to a halt, because the main signalling centres, which employ around 3,000 people, would not be staffed.

Network Rail took over from the infamous rail company Railtrack in 2002.

Finland: Attempts to break harbour strike

Port workers have been involved in an indefinite strike since March 4 for a wage increase, more job protection and better severance pay for workers made redundant. The 3,400 workers are members of the Transport Workers Union. The union said that port management was attempting to withdraw basic job protection rights.

The strike had an immediate impact as Europe's two biggest papermakers, Stora Enso Oyj and UPM-Kymmene Oyj, were forced to begin to wind down production. UPM announced that it had closed one of its mills and that the strike would eventually lead to all mills being closed.

Negotiations aimed at ending the ongoing strike by stevedores at Finnish harbours continued on March 16 and 17, with representatives of the Confederation of Finnish Industry (EK) and the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK).

In a newspaper interview March 16, Timo Rätty, president of the Finnish Transport Workers Union (AKT), said that his union's strikes have never been settled without the involvement of EK and the companies involved.

In the talks, management is represented by the Finnish Port Operators Association, largely controlled by the country's largest port operator, Stevedco. Stevedco's CEO Kari Savolainen is the chairman of the board of the Port Operators Association.

According to the Finnish Forest Industries Federation, 60 percent of Finland's paper production capacity is at a standstill because of the ongoing strike. A Sampo Bank economist says that the drawn-out conflict is cutting one half of a percentage point from the growth of Finnish GDP.

Egypt gripped by protests and demonstrations

A number of industrial demonstrations took place March 15 in Cairo and in governorates outside the capital.

"In Gharbiya, some 800 workers of the Tanta Flax and Oils Company held a sit-in on company premises," wrote almasryalyoum.com. "Workers say they never received end-of-service bonuses, amounting to LE40,000 per worker, which had been promised them last month by Manpower

Minister Aisha Abdel Hady.

“Meanwhile, employees of the Amonsito textile company continued to demonstrate before the parliament building in Cairo for the 15th consecutive day. Demonstrators expressed their increasing frustration because parliament postponed discussion of their demands until next Thursday.”

The same day, 60 teachers in Helwan struck after the state-run General Authority for Illiteracy refused to grant their students diplomas even though the students had passed exams. Dozens of physically and mentally disabled people staged protests outside the parliament building to demand jobs.

Zimbabwe: Public sector workers return to work

After one month’s strike action, public sector workers have returned to work. They struck in pursuit of a US\$600 per month salary. Most of the workers are on salaries of US\$150-270. The government offered an increase of US\$17 a month. The workers involved included teachers, hospital workers and civil servants.

University lecturers who were part of the action would appear to be the only group that has won concessions. A university web site article on March 14 states lecturers will now earn US\$800, up from US\$290.

Nigeria: Lagos truck drivers strike

Truck drivers based in Lagos began strike action last week. They are responsible for the transport of fresh food such as tomatoes, yams and watermelons to the Lagos markets. They are striking to protest the “multiple taxation” they have to pay out to government officials when bringing goods to Lagos from the north of the country. They also have to pay police at checkpoints when bringing goods into the city.

A driver speaking anonymously to the *Nigerian Daily Independent* explained, “We cannot continue like this, on every trip, we spend an average of N100,000 (660 US\$) to get to the markets in Lagos. How much are we making and what will be left for us and our families? This is just a warning strike, if nothing is done, the situation will become worse.”

Rwanda: Taxi drivers strike over non-payment of wages

Around 130 employees of International Express went on strike March 15 over unpaid salaries. International Express is a subsidiary of Atraco transporters, which provides a taxi service, widely used as public transport. Those on strike included drivers, cashiers and cleaners.

Jean Claude Birikunzira, a driver, said he had not been paid for three months. Speaking to the *New Times* newspaper, he explained, “What makes things worse is they don’t tell us when they will pay.”

South Africa: Gold miners on brink of strike

Talks between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Gold

One mining company appear to be deadlocked. The union is involved in discussion with the company over payment of living out allowances and a pay increase at a newly developed mine at Modder East. The NUM is seeking a one-year agreement, but the company is pushing for a two-year agreement. The union represents more than 1,000 miners at the site.

Under South African labour law the union could declare a strike with 48 hours notice after having obtained a certificate of non-resolution from the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration.



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