

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

26 March 2010

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

## UK: British Gas workers vote for strike over bullying

Employees of British Gas have voted overwhelmingly to strike after alleged bullying by management, and over changes to staff terms and conditions.

The General and Municipal Boilmaker's union (GMB) said its members supported strikes by 82 percent and industrial action short of a strike by 90 percent in a high turnout of the 8,000 workers balloted over what it described as "macho management."

## Germany: New four-day strike by Lufthansa pilots looms

Pilots at Deutsche Lufthansa AG are threatening to stage a fresh four-day strike April 13-16, after talks the union and airline failed to resolve the dispute over pay and job security.

Lufthansa is offering no pay rise over a 21-month period and imposing worse working conditions.

The start of the planned strike was delayed until then to avoid disruption during the Easter holiday and give Lufthansa's management "time to realign its course," the Cockpit union said in a statement. The pilots went out on strike last month, but the planned four-day walkout was cut short after a day and negotiations between management and the union resumed.

The dispute at Germany's biggest airline also affects Lufthansa Cargo and the budget Germanwings subsidiary. In addition, Lufthansa owns or holds stakes in other airlines, including Swiss International Airlines, Brussels Airlines and the US airline JetBlue.

Cabin crew at British Airways (BA) are preparing for a second strike this weekend, in opposition to the airline's attempts to rip up existing terms and conditions. It is the first stoppage at BA in 13 years.

## Ireland: Passport Office strike

Workers at the Passport Office in Dublin have served strike notice on the government, which could take effect in the next few days.

Sources in the Civil Public and Services Union (CPSU) said the strike was triggered by the Department of Foreign Affairs' threat to dock

employees' pay if they refused to carry out their duties.

Department of Foreign Affairs Secretary General David Cooney appeared before the Foreign Affairs Committee to discuss the crisis. The department wants a cessation of industrial action, which includes noncooperation with temporary staff, as well as the lifting of bans on overtime and the answering of phones. The backlog is now so large that all applications are urgent, Cooney said.

Assistant secretary general at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ray Bassett, raised the possibility of privatising the production of passports.

It was announced March 23 that staff would give priority to those with immediate travel plans.

## Croatia: Possible strike after Easter

The *Croatian Times* reported March 18 on an announcement by the head of the Union of Autonomous Trade Unions, Ana Knezevic, who said "there could be a strike during the week after Easter because of the general state of the economy."

"The short, one-to-two-hour strike would take place in Zagreb, Osijek, Split and Rijeka and be a prelude to a larger protest already scheduled for Labour Day on 1 May," she said.

The paper reported Knezevic's comments attacking the Croatian government for imposing a crisis tax that had undermined "purchasing power."

"We warned that the crisis tax would decrease consumption, and that is what happened," said Knezevic.

The government introduced the crisis tax in August 2009. There has been sharp a rise in the numbers of unemployed, which rose to 317,625 in February.

## Egypt: Pharmacists in strike threat

According to *Al Masry Al Youm* March 17, members of the Pharmacists union threatened to strike to protest what they describe as an illegal agreement and the "inflexibility of the Ministry of Finance and the Tax Authority."

Members of the union say an agreement signed by the secretary general, Mahmoud Abdel Maqoud, with the Finance Ministry and the Tax Authority is not legal. The union called on pharmacists throughout Egypt to submit their tax statements in accordance with a 2005 agreement. It

warned against any “violations of the moral and financial rights” of its members and said it plans to take legal action against the ministry and the Tax Authority.

Abdel Maqsood is to be removed from his position as secretary general, accused of breaking the law and signing an agreement that “jeopardizes the interests of pharmacists.”

Abdel Maqsood said in previous statements that he takes the credit for the success of previous strikes against the Tax Authority. He also accused members of the syndicate council of attempting to put the syndicate under the control of members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

### **Egypt: Oil workers continue protest**

Eight hundred workers at Petrotrade during a sit-in at company's headquarters, Garbeiya, March... Read more A protest by around 800 workers employed at Petrojet oil services company at its premises in Gharbiya to demand salary increases and end-of-the-year profit sharing entered its second day this week. The workers have threatened to stage a sit-in in front of the parliament building in Cairo if their demands are not met. Workers said some company staff received as much as LE20,000 (US\$2,625) in profit sharing, while others received as little as LE3,000 (US\$545). Workers were hired in 2002 for a monthly salary of LE400 (US\$70), while only a year later newly hired workers were appointed for just LE200 (US\$35) a month. The company fired 40 of their colleagues when they asked to be treated equally. Petrojet is an affiliate of the General Petroleum Authority and employs more than 18,000 workers across the country.

### **Iraq: Oil workers strike despite threat of arrest**

Workers at Iraq's South Refineries Company (SRC) in Basra are set to strike this week, after the breakdown of negotiations “on calls for a shakeup in the SRC's management and an increase in salaries,” according to the *Iraq Oil Report* web site.

There were fears that security forces were gathering at the SRC, and that striking workers would be arrested if they demonstrated.

This is the latest in a series of incidents of worker unrest at the country's second largest refinery. Iraq's oil unions, which are banned under remaining Saddam Hussein-era laws, have demanded better pay and working conditions. A strike was scheduled for February, but was called off after negotiations restarted.

Last week an estimated 700 workers at the 150,000-barrel per day refinery, 16 kilometres west of Basra, held a three-hour strike. Workers demanded SRC Director General Abdul Hussein Nasir be dismissed, as well as the finance director, Karima Hussein Thajil. They called for 80 percent, rather than the current 70 percent, of the company's budget for workers' wages, that food consumed during work hours be paid for and that work hours be reduced.

One worker spoke to the *Iraq Oil Report* on condition of anonymity, saying, “I am trying to call my colleagues to stop the protests because local police and oil police are already deployed there.”

The web site said he believed police had a list of people to arrest, adding, “It seems we live in a police-state again, in the way that they treat the demonstrators.”

Union leader Hassan Jumaa said, “To deploy security forces and to issue warrants of arrests against the protesters is normal in the new democracy

and in the state of Maliki. This is the new democracy.”

The *Iraq Oil Report* concluded, “Independent unions in the public sector, forbidden under Saddam Hussein, are still not formally recognized by the government and frequently clash with official policy, including actively campaigning against provisions in the draft federal oil law.”

### **Israel: Hundreds protest deportation of the children of foreign workers**

Hundreds of protestors gathered in Levinsky Park in southern Tel Aviv, March 20, to demonstrate against the possible deportation of 1,200 children of foreign workers at the end of the current school year.

Demonstrators held signs reading, “Israeli children—Israeli citizenship” and “I want to stay,” and chanted, “There are no illegal children” and “No to deportation.”

Knesset member Dov Khenin (Hadash), who is active in the effort against the deportation of children, said, “This protest is the final step before the fate of these children is set. If there is someone who thinks we have fallen asleep or that we've tired, it is not so. We will not rest and not end our struggle. We are telling the decision makers to end the ongoing threat to these children.”

An inter-ministerial committee formed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to decide soon on what will happen to the children when the school year ends.

### **Nigeria: Benue state teachers threatened with sack**

Teachers in Benue state, members of the Academic Staff Union of Secondary School Teachers (ASUSST), have been threatened with the sack by the state government. The teachers are striking in support of a 27 percent pay increase and began their action in the second week of March.

The state government has threatened disciplinary action if the teachers do not return to work.

### **Kenya: Hospital workers walkout over non-payment of arrears**

Hospital workers at the Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) staged a walkout last week over arrears of wages owed them. They returned to work after five hours. The KNH staff are owed Sh98 million (US\$1.2 million) in arrears of wages. Similar action took place in other hospitals. Overall Ministry of Health employees are owed Sh350 million (US\$ 4.3 million) in pay arrears. The Medical Services Permanent Secretary, James Ole Kiyapi, addressing the press after touring of some of the affected hospitals, said outstanding arrears would be paid before the end of the current financial year. He told the press of his concerns that if the money was not found, more widespread strike action could result.

### **South Africa: Miners in strike action**

Around 1,000 gold miners, members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), began strike action at the Gold One Mine in Springs on the East Rand, March 24. The strike action is over demands for a housing allowance and follows six months of negotiations between management and the NUM that ended in stalemate.

Two hundred miners, members of the NUM, at the Vergenoeg fluorspar mine in Mabopane, have been on strike for a week. Their demands are for travelling allowances, medical aid and housing allowances. Lesiba Seshoka of the NUM said, “We don’t foresee how the company will quickly resolve this matter, particularly because it has already been a very lengthy process.”

#### **Swaziland: Court order halts Building Society strike**

Members of the Swaziland Union of Financial Institutions and Allied Workers, working for the Swaziland Building Society, were due to strike on March 22. However, following an affidavit brought by the Society Managing Director, the Industrial Court has ruled the union must suspend its threatened action.

The union had called the strike following months of negotiations with the building society over many issues. The dispute had been the subject of negotiations at the Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration Commission since October last year. The dispute was declared unresolved in January of this year.

Five issues remained unresolved including car loans, staff mortgages and personal loan schemes.

#### **Algeria: Striking public health workers threatened with sack**

The Algerian Ministry of Health has threatened to revoke the jobs of public health workers who have been on strike for two months.

The workers are members of the National Union of Parishioners of Public Health (SNPSP) and the union of Parishioners Specializing in Public Health (SNPSSP). They are on strike over improved conditions and provision of staff housing. The ministry has declared the strike illegal and threatened to begin taking action against those not reporting back for work.



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