

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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

Danish brewery workers end two-week strike

Carlsberg-based employees of the Danish brewing company Carlsberg returned to work May 18 following a two-week strike.

The workers, employed in production and warehouses, walked off the job at the Fredericia brewery in western Denmark on May 6. The employees struck in pursuit of a 1.6 percent pay increase this year and the following year. The following day, drivers joined the stoppage after the company had requested non-striking staff load beer crates onto trucks.

A spokesman for the workers' trade union said they had called on workers to return to work in order for negotiations to take place with management. Union representative Hans Andersen said on Tuesday that the striking staff "had to go back" if talks over pay were to be held with Carlsberg.

Carlsberg had previously maintained that there would be no pay increase this year for staff. The striking workers represented more than half of Carlsberg's workforce in Denmark.

Tens of thousands of Romanian workers protest government austerity

On Wednesday, tens of thousands of workers protested in the Romanian capital Bucharest in opposition to government plans to cut wages, pensions and other benefits and social services.

Under the plans, thousands of public sector jobs are to be lost, wages reduced by a quarter and pensions by 15 percent.

Up to 50,000 people participated in the protests, blocking traffic in central Bucharest for two hours. Many of those in attendance chanted anti-government slogans, including, "Down with the Lying Government!" and "You have pawned our future".

During the protests, Economy Ministry official Marcel Hoara was booed and pelted with water and stones following his appearance at a live TV debate.

As the protest was taking place, the government of Prime Minister Emil Boc said that the austerity measures, due to be implemented on June 1, were "the only viable solution for the country's future". According to the Romanian Central Bank, the government can cover its costs for only 20 days per month. Last year the government was loaned €20 billion from the International Monetary Fund, European Union and World Bank as the economy shrank by 7.1 percent. The austerity measures will have a devastating impact in a country where poverty is already widespread. Average monthly wages are just €450 a month and unemployment stands

at about 740,000. Under the plans, the government is to shed 70,000 state employees' jobs from the current level of 1.36 million by 2011.

According to the IMF, up to 1 million people may be unemployed by the end of this year.

Norway: Cleaners in Oslo strike in pay dispute

On Thursday, 1,150 cleaners in Oslo began industrial action following the breakdown in talks over pay between the National Federation of Service Industries' (NHO Service) employers and the Norsk Arbeidsmandsforbund trade union. The strike is the first by the workers in 24 years.

Union leader Erna Hagensen said they had recommended workers not accept NHO Service's offer. Hagensen said the proposed deal did not include a minimum wage guarantee and added, "Some say they've been given a 3 percent rise, others 3.5 percent. We didn't get either. Those who earn the least are those who are worst paid".

The cleaners are employed at a range of workplaces, including businesses and universities. These include the University of Oslo, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation and telecommunications company Telenor.

Polish energy workers protest to demand pay increase

Some 2,000 Grupa Energa company employees protested in the Polish city of Gdansk on May 14 in a dispute over pay. Grupa Energa, which operates in the north of Poland, claims to have offered employees a 7 percent pay increase.

According to reports, workers are demanding a 10 percent pay increase and shares in the company.

A Polskie Radio report stated an "agreement signed in 2007 gave Energa's employees a guarantee of receiving stable salaries until 2017, 80 percent discount on energy, health benefits, Christmas bonuses and so-called 13th salaries."

Schoolteachers strike in Wrexham, Wales

On May 20, teachers at a secondary school in Wrexham, Wales struck to oppose plans to make teachers redundant. The staff are members of the NASUWT trade union and are employed at the Darland High School in Rosset

Cuts are being made at the school by Wrexham Council in order to reduce its budget deficit. A number of non-teaching staff have already

been made redundant in order to save £78,000 in costs a year. To reduce costs further it plans to shed eight teaching posts and to re-employ five of the staff on alternative part-time contracts.

The council claims that the current deficit of £291,005 could rise to £488,769 by the 2010/11 financial year

The NASUWT is not opposed to staff being made redundant as long as this is imposed on the basis of “early retirement”. Supporting the loss of jobs, NASUWT General Secretary Chris Keates said, “The Wrexham authority’s refusal to consider voluntary early retirement to enable a managed staffing reduction process clearly demonstrates that the authority places little value on its staff and the contribution they make.”

Spanish workers set to protest government austerity measures

Spanish government employees were set to protest on Thursday evening at the Ministry of the Treasury in Madrid and at government offices in other towns. The one-hour protests were called by the General Union of Workers (UGT).

The rallies were called in opposition to government plans to cut state employees’ pay by 5 percent this year and freeze it in 2011. The Socialist Party government of Prime Minister Jose Zapatero is imposing the measures as part of a €15 billion austerity plan announced last week.

The government plans to impose the pay cuts, to be implemented from June, via a Royal Decree, bypassing parliament.

The refusal of the unions to wage any serious struggle and their subservience to the Zapatero regime, illustrated by their calling of a one-hour rally, was noted this week by one academic. Pedro Schwartz, an economics professor at the San Pablo University in Madrid, said, “My impression is that the unions want to make noise without calling a general strike, because a general strike would hurt the Socialist government deeply”.

South Africa: Possible end to Transnet strike

Around 54,000 workers of the logistics company Transnet have been on strike since last week. Workers belonging to the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) went on strike Monday and were followed by members of the larger United Transport and Allied Union (UTATU) on the Wednesday. They were seeking a 15 percent pay rise, having rejected an 11 percent offer from the company.

Transnet, a state-owned company, is responsible for freight transport on the railways and the railway infrastructure as well as having responsibility for port, terminals and pipelines.

The strike is beginning to have a big impact. David Sussman of the retailer JD group, said the strike was having an impact on their inventory levels, commenting, “Our containers ... sitting at Durban.... There is a build-up of containers at the port.”

Economist Mike Schussler explained that fruit exports were being particularly affected and put a probable cost of the dispute at between R300 million and R500 million a day (US\$38.5-64.3 million).

Two reports published Wednesday stated prolonged talks between the company and the two unions have been taking place, under the auspices of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration.

A May 19 Reuters report quotes Chris de Vos, UTATU general secretary, saying, “We firmly believe this agreement will be signed (on Thursday) afternoon... Friday is the earliest we could get back to work...”

There is a draft agreement signed by Transnet already.” The Reuters report gave no details of the agreement.

However, a separate report by the South African Independent Online web site explains that workers earning R50,000 (US\$6,400) or more per annum would receive an 11 percent raise. The 38,000 workers on less than R50,000 would receive the 11 percent rise, or have their wages increased to R50,000 if this were greater.

Metrorail workers in South Africa hold strike action

Workers belonging to the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union and the United Transport and Allied Workers Union (UTATU) and working for Metrorail, Shosholoaz Meyl and Autopax bus services began strike action Monday. The nationwide action hit passenger travel, especially commuter services, with 2 million people being affected.

The workers are seeking a 16 percent pay increase, with a minimum of R4,500 (US\$580), four months paid maternity leave and no overtime cuts.

Talks between the unions and the employers’ umbrella organisation, the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA), began on Tuesday and continued Wednesday. News reports state a deal has almost been reached. A South Africa Independent Online report of May 19 says that Metrorail had increased its pay offer to 10 percent and that UTATU General Secretary Chris de Vos would accept this, but that the union is looking for pledges not to cut overtime or allowances.

Striking miners return to work in Zimbabwe

Around 25,000 miners belonging to the Associated Mineworkers Union of Zimbabwe (AMWUZ) are set to return to work. They began strike action May 12 after employers reneged on a deal offering a minimum wage of US\$140 a month. The miners were also pushing for the average wage to be increased to between US\$290 and US\$490 a month.

Metallon Gold, the country’s biggest mining company, said the strike had cost them US\$8 million. The union ended the strike after coming under government pressure for the dispute to be put to the labour court. A hearing is set for May 20.



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