

# Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

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

## Greece: Protesters rally against government pensions attacks

On June 5, several thousand demonstrators gathered in Athens and other cities to protest against the attacks being carried out on pension rights by the Greek social democratic government of Prime Minister George Papandreou. The main trade union federations, the private sector GSEE and the public sector ADEDY called the protests.

The pension cuts include increasing the minimum retirement age to 65, cutting entitlement to thousands of people and reducing the overall value of pensions. They are part of the government's austerity measures that include tax increases, wage cuts and a hiring freeze in the civil service.

Some demonstrators carried banners reading "hands off social insurance", while others denounced the "selling off" of public benefits, referring to the government's announcement of a three-year privatisation drive in key sectors.

Demonstrations also took place in the second city, Thessaloniki in the north and the town of Iraklio.

Without setting any date, the unions have threatened to strike later this month as the pension reform proposal is presented to parliament.

## Greek railway workers strike to oppose planned privatisation

Railway workers in Greece began a 24-hour strike on Thursday to protest government plans to sell a 49-percent stake in the state railway company OSE. The stoppage is the first against the government's plans to sell off state firms as part of a three-year privatisation programme.

Part of the recent European Union/International Monetary Fund loan to the Greek government stipulates that 3 billion euros must be raised from privatisations by 2013.

The strike halted trains and closed stations nationwide. Reuters reported that some 300 rail workers protested at the infrastructure ministry in Athens, with some holding banners reading, "Say No to the privatisation" and "Stop the lay-offs".

OSE loses some 1 billion euros a year and has debts of around €10 billion.

## Greek media and public transport workers set to strike

A national strike of Greek media employees was set to go ahead

Thursday to protest government changes to the social security system. The industrial action also involved a demand for the safeguarding of labour rights and the signing of "dignified" collective agreements.

Journalists in the capital planned to hold a demonstration outside the Athens Journalists Union building in downtown Athens, followed by a march to parliament.

Public transport workers also planned to hold a 24-hour strike Thursday. Workers employed on urban buses, trolleys, trams, the ISAP electric trains and the Athens Metro, are expected to participate in the stoppage.

## London Underground staff set to strike in ongoing dispute

London Underground maintenance employees are set to hold two 48-hour strikes over pay, jobs, safety and working conditions in an ongoing dispute. The strikes, called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union are due to take place from June 23, and July 14. They will affect the Jubilee, Northern and Piccadilly lines. RMT members voted to support industrial action by a margin of nine to one.

The workers are in dispute with Transport for London (TfL), who will shortly take control of the maintenance of the Jubilee, Northern and Piccadilly Lines on the underground network. The work is currently undertaken by private contractor Tube Lines.

RMT leader Bob Crow said, "We have given TfL, and their newly-acquired subsidiary Tube Lines, plenty of opportunity to give us assurances that staff won't take the hit for the failure of the privatisation project".

BBC London recently revealed leaked documents showing that many track faults had been left for up to three years after being reported without being fixed by Tube Lines. According to the document, at least three were still not fixed more than 1,400 days after being first reported.

## British Telecom workers to ballot for industrial action in pay dispute

British Telecom (BT) staff are to be balloted for industrial action by their trade union following the expiry of a June 4 deadline. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) said it would ballot its 55,000 BT members on industrial action if BT failed to increase its 2 percent pay offer by that date.

This is the first dispute of its kind at the formerly state-owned telecommunications company in 23 years. A strike is expected to cause significant disruption as the majority of CWU members work as engineers or in call centres, helping customers with faults. Thousands could be left without phone lines or Internet access.

At last month's annual conference in Bournemouth, CWU delegates voted unanimously to ballot members about strike action. According to

reports the union is calling for a 5 percent pay rise.

Although the CWU has at this point rejected BT's offer of a 2 percent pay rise, the union accepted a similar deal for postal workers as part of a concessions contract at Royal Mail earlier in the year.

BT's annual results last month showed a 162 percent increase in cash-flow, and profits of just over £1bn. BT's chief executive Ian Livingston saw his salary increase by £50,000 to £900,000 this year, and his bonuses more than tripled last year. His total pay package, including shares, rose to above £3m.

### **British Airways cabin crew to be balloted for further strike action**

Cabin crew working for British Airways (BA) and members of the Unite union, are to be balloted on further strike action in an ongoing dispute with the airline over staffing levels, working conditions and the removal of travel concessions for those previously participating in strikes.

The announcement of a further strike ballot came as cabin crew approached the end of the final day in the last of a series of five-day walkouts this week. The crews have taken over three weeks of strike action this year in the dispute.

BA boss Willie Walsh has said the airline will hold out against striking cabin crew members "for as long it takes".

Unite has refused to call a further strike, even though it said it could do so under its existing mandate. The union attempted to justify this by stating that its members would not be entitled to legal protection against repercussions from management if it did so.

Unite said about 60 crew members had now been suspended and eight sacked in recent weeks, mainly for "trivial reasons", and has accused the airline of a "crackdown" on union members. On June 8, a delegation of cabin crew staff told Members of Parliament at Parliament that the airline was currently gripped by a "climate of fear".

### **Poland: company sacks trade union activists for involvement in strike action**

On June 1, the leaders of all four unions at the railway rolling-stock producing Wagon Factory in Gniewczyna, Poland were fired in response to a 1.5 hour warning strike held on May 10. The company, owned by a Slovak investment vehicle, Bribon Enterprises, claims that there was no legal basis for the warning strike and the losses caused to the company.

The union activists are members of Solidarity, the Union of Railway Technical Support Workers, the Union of Technical and Economic Workers and the Alternative Trade Union.

About 760 people work at the factory, making it one of the largest employers in the area around Lancut.

### **Lebanon: union federation calls general strike**

This week the General Labour Confederation (GLC) called a general strike to be held on June 17 to protest the Lebanese government's economic policies. The GLC issued a statement in which it criticized the heavy reliance of the 2010 budget on indirect taxation, including a high tax on gasoline and "voiced its readiness" to hold a general strike.

The head of the General Labour Union (GLU) Maroun Khaouli called for participation in the upcoming strike, stating, "The tax on 20 litres of gasoline has exceeded 40 percent of the price of the taxed quantity". In April taxi drivers struck in protest against high gasoline prices.

### **Teachers protest in Beirut, Lebanon**

On Tuesday, intermediary and secondary public school teachers held a sit-in around the Education and Higher Education Ministry near the UNESCO palace in Beirut.

The delegation from the Secondary Teachers' Syndicate requested the Cabinet respond to their demands for promotions and an increase in salaries. Earlier, the teachers threatened to boycott the correction of official exams if their demands were not met.

### **Workers' protests continue throughout Egypt**

As of June 8, around 650 workers from the Arco Steel company in Sadat City, Monufiya, continued their strike for an eighth consecutive day to protest the breach, by the company's managing director, of a contract signed in April.

The workers say the contract stated their allowances would be raised. The employees are also protesting what they describe as arbitrary decisions to transfer certain workers and turn them from technical workers into phone operators.

Workers have stated that if their demands are not satisfied, they will go on hunger strike.

Meanwhile, 20 workers employed by the United Sugar Company of Egypt continued their sit-in for the fourth day to protest what they describe as arbitrary dismissal from work.

Some of the workers said the company had attempted to force them to submit their resignations. They said the management had already dismissed 24 employees, pushing them to file lawsuits in court against the company. They said they would not end their protest until they get their jobs back.

*Al Masry Al Youm* reported that in western Luxor, 56 souvenir store owners continued their sit-in for the second day, as well as a hunger strike at Qarna hospital, to protest a decision that increased their monthly rent from LE350 to LE385.

In Aswan, workers at the governorate's cleaning company went on strike, and 70 of the company's workers, technicians and drivers gathered in front of the city council to protest deductions from their salaries. Some of the workers assembled in front of the administrative prosecution office and refused to return to work.

In Daqahliya, staff at Mansoura University Hospital suspended their strike yesterday after security forces put pressure on department heads to prevent employees from participating in the strike, which began June 2.

### **Egypt: pharmacists stage sit-in**

On May 31 a court in Alexandria heard a lawsuit submitted by 34 pharmacists, who requested that the Egyptian Pharmacists Syndicate be put under sequestration by the government.

*Al Masry Al Youm* reported that “scores of pharmacists staged a sit-in inside a courtroom on Monday after the judge postponed the delivery of a final verdict until 21 June”.

Protesters said that the court had denied the defence team a chance to defend its clients. They were joined by another 600 of their colleagues, who also protested the court’s decision to postpone the verdict.

### **Stadium builders strike in Mozambique**

Workers building the national stadium in the Zimpeto suburb of the Mozambique capital Maputo have gone on strike seeking a 20 percent pay rise and a bonus on the building’s completion. The work is a joint venture between the Mozambique and Chinese governments. Work began in April 2008 and is due for completion this autumn.

The work is being undertaken by a Mozambican workforce together with Chinese workers. The Chinese workers on the site have not been involved in the strike by their Mozambican co-workers. Jose de Sousa the deputy director of the project told the media the Chinese contractors only pay the minimum wage for Mozambican building workers of 2,435 Meticais a month (US\$74), and there was no agreement to pay a bonus on completion.

### **Gold miners strike at Aurora Grootvlei mine in South Africa**

Around 100 members of the Solidarity trade union working at the Aurora Grootvlei gold mine began strike action June 7. They are striking to demand the payment of several months of unpaid wages. Aurora Empowerment Systems bought the mine from Pamodzi Liquidators last year, but has failed to pay the full amount asked by the liquidators.

Most of the 3,000 workforce have left to seek work elsewhere, but the 100 remaining workers were maintaining the mine and pumping out water. The company has also failed to pay insurance contributions on behalf of the workers.

Aurora is looking to a Swiss investment firm to invest in the mine to be able to re-commence production.

### **Resident doctors strike at Lagos University Teaching Hospital in Nigeria**

Doctors belonging to the Association of Resident Doctors at Lagos University Teaching Hospital took strike action at the end of last week. They pledged to strike for seven days. They began the action when the doctors had a 40 percent deduction taken from their salary due to their participation in a recent national strike.

The president of the Association Dr Olayinka Atilola said he would call on nationwide solidarity action if the hospital management did not reverse its decision.

### **Osun state lecturers continue industrial action**

Around 20,000 lecturers belonging to the Council of Academic Staff Union of Osun State-owned Tertiary Institutions (COASUOSTI) are now in their second week of strike action.

The lecturers from the State Polytechnic in Iree, the education colleges in Ila-Ofangun and Ilesa and the State College of Technology at Esa-Oke are seeking implementation of nationally agreed pay scales under the CONTISS agreement made in 2003. They are also demanding more funding for the colleges and for the agreed retirement age of 65 for lecturers to be implemented.

The state governor, Olagunsoye Oyinlola, claims he lacks the revenue to fund their demands.



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