

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.

Greek transport strike protests government austerity

Public transport and railway workers in Greece took strike action Wednesday to oppose plans by the social democratic PASOK government to make massive cuts. The government of Prime Minister George Papandreou is seeking to “streamline” the Hellenic Railways Organisation and public transportation as part of its austerity programme agreed with the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank and EU Commission.

The industrial action was held between 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. The capital Athens was the most affected by the action as bus, metro, urban rail and tram systems all ground to a halt.

The rail workers struck for five hours, halting the network nationwide. Intercity trains were hit by the action, which also forced the cancellation of services to Bulgaria. On September 7, the Bulgarian state railway company BDZ announced that the two daily trains running between the Bulgarian capital Sofia and the Greek city of Thessaloniki would run only in the section between Sofia and the Kulata border crossing point.

Another five-hour strike is being held by railway workers on Thursday.

Miners vote to strike Poland’s largest coal mining company

This week Polish miners employed at Kompania Weglowa, the owners of 21 collieries, voted to strike on September 20. The workers voted for a four-hour strike with a further 24-hour strike on October 4 and a 48-hour strike to be held two weeks later, if the dispute is not resolved.

The miners voted 92.5 percent in favour of industrial action. The dispute is centred on collective pay increases, employment rates and the future of the coal mining industry.

The company is seeking to have the action ruled illegal, using the pretext that the action is not directly regarding pay and conditions. Under Polish employment legislation, industrial action is only legal if it is connected to disputes over wages and working conditions.

Kompania Weglowa employs some 66,000 workers and is the nation’s largest mining company.

Spanish coal miners protest unpaid wages

Up to 500 Spanish coal miners began protests on September 2 in mines at two pits in Palencia and Leon to demand payment of their wages. The companies employing the miners have decided to suspend payment of salaries due to a government threat to cut subsidies to the mining sector. The government said this is necessary as it is cheaper to import coal from abroad.

The mining companies said that local power companies are using the cheaper imported coal instead and that it cannot afford to pay wages under these conditions.

As of September 8, 52 of the miners were still involved in the underground protest at the only operating mine owned by Union Minera del Norte, located in the northern province of Palencia.

At the Alto Bierzo mine in Tremor de Arriba, in the Leon province, 14 miners are continuing to protest to demand payment of two months’ wages.

The action by the miners follows a European Commission ruling in July that facilitates the closure of loss-making hard coal mines in the European Union by October 1, 2014.

BBC staff vote to strike to protest attacks on pension rights

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) staff, who are members of three trade unions, voted this week to take industrial action to protest attacks on their pension rights. In a ballot, members of Bectu, Unite and the National Union of Journalists voted by more than 90 percent in favour of action.

The BBC, which has a £1.5 billion to £2 billion pension deficit, is proposing to cap its final salary pension benefits for existing members from April 2011 and to close the scheme to new employees. The plan would also break the link between final salary and pension benefits by capping pensionable salary growth at 1 percent a year.

Despite the clear mandate, the unions have refused to set a date for strike action to go ahead. Instead the unions are planning further talks with the BBC to be held over the next two weeks. The general secretary of Bectu, Gerry Morrissey, said the unions wanted the BBC to “now come up with more realistic proposals”.

Following the ballot result, the BBC’s director general, Mark Thompson, stated, “As I said in August, our room for manoeuvre is limited. We are facing a large pension deficit and must act now to reduce it.”

He alluded to being close to agreeing a deal with the unions, saying, “During the last few weeks, we have been talking to the joint unions to

discuss the areas where there may be scope for alternatives. We've looked at a number of options and are now in the process of working up the details of what we believe could be an additional workable proposal. We expect to be ready to announce full details in the middle of September and we anticipate that this will trigger an additional consultation period."

Firefighters in London begin strike action ballot

Around 6,000 firefighters in London began voting this week in a ballot for industrial action in a dispute over new contracts. The workers are members of the Fire Brigade Union (FBU). The result of the ballot is due on September 17.

The London Fire Brigade (LFB) is planning to terminate the current working hours agreement and is demanding that firefighters sign new contracts or face the sack. According to the FBU, these include new start and finishing times to shifts, changing the shift pattern from two 9-hour days and two 15-hour nights to a flat 12-hour shift.

London Fire Brigade's plans also reportedly include an immediate pay freeze, alongside the government's own two-year pay freeze for all public sector staff.

A blog posting made by LFB commissioner Ron Dobson in July threatened all London firefighters with the sack "if no significant progress is reached" in negotiations. Dobson warned that a "formal consultation" may be considered which "may eventually involve termination of employment".

In August, Dobson wrote to the FBU informing them that he was opening consultation on "terminating the contracts of these staff and offering to re-engage them on new contracts of employment."

Unite trade union calls off planned strike at Coca Cola in London

This week the Unite trade union at Coca Cola's plant in Edmonton, London called off a planned strike set for Wednesday. Workers at the factory are in dispute with the company over pay and recently rejected a 2 percent pay offer.

The 110 staff at the plant had voted 8-1 in favour of strike action to protest an offer that is 3 percent below inflation.

The Edmonton plant produces 2 million bottles of Cola every 24 hours. In the first six months of this year Coca Cola reported profits of £2.5 billion

Walsall, England: Bakers trade union calls off strike at Maple Leaf Bakery

Last week the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union week called off a strike set to be held Friday by 150 workers at the Maple Leaf Bakery in Walsall, England.

The strike was called after 91 percent of employees voted for industrial action, rejecting a new pay deal. The Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union had recommended that its members accept the offer.

The union's regional officer John Higgins said, "The sticking point was breaks and flexibility. Under the terms of what was being offered, the company would be able to send employees home before the end of their

shift, if there was no work left."

Following further talks over the weekend between management and the union, a new offer was recommended to the workforce, which was accepted.

Workers have been in dispute with the firm for more than two months and had refused to sign new contracts they claimed reduced pay, holiday and overtime. In August staff voted for a two-day strike, which was also called off by the union.

Egyptian trade union employees protest over wages

"Dozens of laid-off workers continued their protests at the Egyptian General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) Thursday. The 58 workers from seven different companies clashed with security services the previous day, when they reportedly tried to storm the office of the federation's president Hussein Megawer," reported *Al Masry Al Youm* on September 2.

According to the news source, the workers accused the GFTU of stopping wage payments and criticized the government for negligence.

The workers claim they are being made a scapegoat to intimidate others and said they will continue protesting until they return to work and receive compensation for their unpaid wages.

The *Daily News Egypt* reported September 1 that 49 labour protests were recorded in Egypt in July 2010 alone, according to the monthly report by the Children of the Earth Centre for Human Rights.

The protests include sit-ins, strikes and demonstrations, which, the report says, show the "escalating frustrations" of workers and employees in the country.

Israeli bank workers reject offer and continue strike

Employees at First International Bank of Israel continued with their industrial action after rejecting a bonus offer at a meeting September 1.

Workers committee chairman Hanoch Livneh met executives, though CEO Smadar Barber-Zadik did not attend.

Israel: Ben Gurion Airport workers strike over pension funds

From September 9, employees at Ben Gurion Airport in Israel will operate under emergency procedures with a reduced number of staff members as part of a dispute over pension funds. Heavy delays are expected both with arrivals and departures.

Staff threatened to take industrial action two weeks ago. The union has said that the Israeli Airport Authority (IAA) is dragging its feet in negotiations over the establishment of a fund to safeguard workers' pensions. Airport employees say the workers' committee and the Histadrut labour federation have approached the IAA on this issue several times over the past two years, but no progress has been made.

September is a busy travel period, as thousands seek to take advantage of the end of summer and the month of Jewish holidays.

Ugandan sugar workers strike

More than 500 workers at the Sugar Corporation of Uganda Limited (SCOUL) went on strike at the weekend. SCOUL is based in the Mukono district, 50 km east of Kampala. The workers are striking over poor conditions and for a wage increase.

The strike began Friday, September 3. The workers marched to the SCOUL head office where they established a picket.

Nigerian police attack lecturers' demonstration

Striking lecturers belonging to the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) were prevented by police from holding a march and demonstration in Enugu. The protest was over the refusal of state governors in the South East region to implement the FGN/ASUU agreement. The agreement between the union and the federal government in 2009 set out terms and conditions for academic staff.

The ASUU members planned to march from Enugu State University of Technology (ESUT) to Government House in Enugu to hand a letter to the governor. However they were prevented from leaving the grounds of ESUT to begin their march by detachments of armed police, who set dogs on them.

Prevented from holding their march the ASUU members rallied in the ESUT grounds. ASUU organizer, Emmanuel Sodeke, told the rally: "We are on strike because of poor funding of the university system, autonomy and improvement in the conditions of service. The strike is total and indefinite... The agreement has been complied with by both federal and other state-owned universities, with the exception of the state universities in the south east."

South African motor accessory workers strike enters second week

The strike by 70,000 workers making car components and in the fuel retail sector has entered its second week. The workers are seeking a 15 percent pay increase and benefits improvement. The employers' offer was 6.6 percent. The car component workers are represented by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA).

Amongst the factories affected are tyre manufacturers, Goodyear and Bridgestone, where production has ceased.

The lack of components is now affecting car manufacturers and some such as Toyota, Ford, General Motors and Volkswagen have had to suspend production. The car manufacturers themselves were hit by strike action last month, which they claim led to the loss of production of around 17,000 vehicles.

The unions and employers were due to have further negotiating meetings on September 7. Karl Cloete, NUMSA deputy general secretary, said: "It is in their interest to table a revised offer."



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