

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 truck drivers strike extended

On Wednesday, freight truckers across Greece decided to indefinitely extend their strike against government plans to privatise the sector. The strike, which began on Monday, would continue, said union chief Georges Tzortzatos after a general assembly of the Greek truck owners' confederation.

The action is a resumption of a dispute that began in July and that led to a six-day strike that paralysed the country. On August 1, the truck drivers union, the Panhellenic Union of Commercial Land Transportations (PSXEM) called off the strike. They voted to accept all the original demands of the social-democratic Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) government.

PASOK made limited promises to review aspects of the industry, which drivers now accuse them of reneging on.

The development ministry announced that it was lifting the petrol price restrictions imposed on Monday to prevent speculation. "We have avoided speculation for the moment, but if there are new problems we will re-impose this measure", said the Secretary of State for Development Ntinios Rovlias.

The government wants to open the freight market to "full competition" within three years to cut transportation costs.

The truck drivers insist that inviting competition into the freight sector by reducing new licence charges is unfair to existing operators who have already paid high start-up fees running up to 300,000 euros.

No new freight licences have been issued in Greece for decades, meaning that would-be operators can only purchase existing permits at high cost.

Greek state railway unions called a 24-hour strike September 14 to protest planned wage and personnel cuts as part of efforts to reform and partially privatise the under-funded rail network.

Faced with its worst financial crisis in decades, Greece is currently tied to a three-year €110 billion (\$140 billion) rescue loan package from the International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank. A delegation from the IMF and EU arrived in Athens Monday for a two-week visit to review Greece's progress and preparations for the 2011 budget.

Greek workers have participated in a series of strikes and protests over unprecedented budget cuts and social attacks the government is seeking to impose. The government is eager to reassure wealthy investors that it is reforming its economy and is a safe investment.

Finance Minister George Papaconstantinou began a three-day road show September 15 to London, Paris and Frankfurt with the head of the

country's debt management agency, Petros Christodoulou, and officials from the ECB, IMF and EU.

Spanish miners protest over unpaid wages

Around 150 miners and supporters temporarily blocked a highway and railroad in the north of the country on September 10 with burning tires and crash barriers to protest against unpaid wages.

The protest, on a stretch of the railway near the town of Bembibre, caused delays for three regional trains, railroad officials said.

The miners also blocked traffic on a nearby highway by sitting on the road and overturning metal carts used to move coal in the mines before police arrived.

Miners in several parts of the country are protesting over unpaid wages and to demand government aid to the coal industry.

Fifty miners have refused to leave a coal mine 500 metres (1,650 feet) below ground near Guardo in the northern Palencia province, since September 2. They are demanding they receive the wages owed for the past two months from the mining company, Union Minera del Norte (Uminsa).

An estimated 10,000 families in Palencia depend on coal for their livelihood.

The miners earn €1,000 to €3,000 (\$1,275 to \$3,820) a month, the highest wages going to "picadors", those doing the most dangerous job of crawling into cramped spaces with heavy jackhammers to extract coal that has been loosened with dynamite blasts.

The miners are also calling for a guaranteed level of coal purchases so as to ensure that Spanish coal-fired power stations buy domestic coal rather than imports. The workers point to the failure of Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to implement a decree that would subsidise utility companies running old coal-fired plants so they will use a certain percentage of Spanish coal instead of importing coal from countries such as South Africa.

Spain's coal mining industry is involved in tough competition with gas-fired electrical utilities and renewable energy initiatives.

Thousands of Romanian public sector workers to strike over wage cuts

More than 30,000 Romanian public sector workers are to go on strike over wage cuts.

Sebastian Oprescu, chairman of the National Union of Public Workers, said September 14 that workers from hundreds of state institutions will

begin industrial action on September 27.

The government slashed public sector wages by 25 percent in July to meet the conditions of a €20 billion (\$25 billion) loan from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Union.

Romania's economy is expected to officially shrink by more than 1 percent this year, after it declined by 7.1 percent in 2009.

Workers walk out at British Coca-Cola plant

Workers at a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Edmonton, north London, took strike action on Wednesday in a dispute over pay. The workforce, members of the Unite trade union, are demanding the drinks corporation increase its 2 percent pay offer to reflect the cost of living.

The 2 percent offer is less than half the rate of inflation.

Unite said the walkout will lead to millions fewer bottles of Coke being produced this month. The Edmonton plant produces about 2 million bottles every 24 hours. Coca-Cola has seven factories in the UK.

Further strikes are planned for later this month.

Strike looms on UK's Southern Railway

Railway workers at a train operating company are threatening to strike due to the rise in the number of attacks on staff. They say Southern Railway is putting staff at risk by cutting back on security measures.

Operations staff, including ticket inspectors and guards at Southern Railway, will be balloted in the next week by the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) union, and a full strike is expected before Christmas if members vote for a walkout.

Last year Southern Railway decided not to renew its contract with security company Meteor, which guarded known trouble hotspots on the network.

Instead, in April, Southern and British Transport Police (BTP) set up a team of Rail Neighbourhood Officers that work across the network. The BTP said reported assaults on staff rose by 22 percent between April and September this year, compared to the same period in 2009.

A total of 49 staff assaults have been reported since April.

Forestry workers set to strike in Finland

Industrial action by workers in the Finnish forestry industry is set to begin on October 1, due to the failure to reach agreement with management over contracts.

The Wood and Allied Workers Union under the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) is currently in contract negotiations.

The industrial action will stop production at the factories of UPM-Kymmene Wood, Stora Enso Wood Products, Metäslitto Osuuskunta, Versowood and Vapo Timber. Around 40 workplaces and over 4,000 workers are to participate in the initial stage.

If no results are reached in the negotiations, the strike is to extend to the Finnish Forest Industries Federation and the Union of Salaried Employees.

Irish National Gallery workers set to strike

Staff at the National Gallery of Ireland have voted for 24-hour strike action over management failure to implement a Labour Court recommendation over working arrangements.

The Labour Court recommended, in January, that management engage with the SIPTU trade union to find a way to integrate staff without compromising security, according to the union organiser, Conor O'Gorman.

The 24-hour strike is to begin at one minute past midnight on October 13.

Italian footballers to strike

A strike was announced September 13 in a statement read by AC Milan defender Massimo Oddo and signed by the captains and union representatives of all 20 clubs in Serie A, in protest over their players' rights in transfer negotiations.

A collective contract between the Italian Players' Association (AIC) and Serie A guaranteeing players' rights expired in the summer.

Talks on a new deal failed, leading to plans to strike on September 25 and 26.

The dispute focuses on a proposal by clubs to limit the rights of players to refuse transfers, as Juventus defender Fabio Grosso recently did following an offer from AC Milan.

The clubs want the right to insist that when a player has a year remaining on his contract, he must accept a transfer to another, equally competitive club.

They propose that if the player does not agree to move, he must instead come to a deal over his contract with his current employers.

The players' association has threatened to strike several times recently over a variety of disputes, but it has always previously stepped back from the brink or come to an agreement with club bosses.

Serie A broke away from the rest of the Italian league at the start of the season, with club bosses eager to maximise profits.

Information centre workers demonstrate in Egypt

On September 14, hundreds of workers from information centres run by the Ministry of Local Development staged demonstrations in front of the Council of Ministers Cairo headquarters to protest their worsening financial situation.

The workers said the government had reneged on a July parliamentary resolution to raise their wages and pay their social security subscriptions. Some employees have threatened to call a hunger strike if their demands were not met.

Meanwhile, workers in provincial information centres refused to accept their monthly wages in solidarity with their colleagues in the capital.

Algerian dockers in wildcat strike

Dockworkers at the country's busiest port, operated by Dubai-based DP

World, have staged an unofficial strike in protest over pay and at a management drive to raise productivity, industry sources told Reuters.

For several weeks stevedores at the port in the Algerian capital have operated an unofficial go-slow, with just a handful of containers being moved each day and a backlog of ships offshore waiting to unload, the sources said.

The terminal, re-named DP World Djazair, handles over 60 percent of the country's external trade, apart from crude oil and gas exports.

DP World, a unit of conglomerate Dubai World, took control of operations at the terminal last year under a 30-year operating concession.

Indebted parent company Dubai World is prepared to sell DP World, among other assets, to help raise billions of dollars it needs to repay creditors, according to a company document obtained by Reuters last month.

The terminal, near the centre of Algiers, was built by the former colonial power France, and much of the infrastructure dates back to this period.

Zimbabwean aircrews take industrial action

Pilots and cabin crew working for Air Zimbabwe went on strike Wednesday last week over pay and conditions. Prior to the dollarization of the economy, pilots used to earn the equivalent of US\$5,000-7,000 and first officers the equivalent of US\$3,000-5,000 a month.

In February, Air Zimbabwe cut the salaries to around US\$1,200 a month. The aircrew struck demanding the restoration of the salary levels and the payment of arrears, which currently stands at US \$1.2 million. The current dispute is costing the airline around US\$0.5 million a day. As well as the salary cut, the airline is seeking to lay off around 500 staff.

Air Zimbabwe stated any aircrew member not returning to work by September 13 would be considered to have terminated their employment. The deadline passed, and the strike continues. The strike is affecting one of the airline's prestigious routes, London to Harare. Many passengers have been left stranded at Gatwick airport as a result of the action.

Nigerian medics continue long-running action

Nigerian doctors in Lagos state, who have been on strike for the last month, have received the support of the Nigeria Medical Association (NMA). The doctors are striking to demand the state government implements the previously nationally negotiated Consolidated Medical Salary Structure (CONMESS).

The state government claims it cannot afford to pay the 12,000 medical staff that would be covered by the CONMESS agreement in the state.

At a joint press conference on Monday, the NMA and the Medical Guild said that rather than negotiating the issue with the doctors and reinstating the sacked former guild chairman, Dr Ibrahim Olaifa, the state government, had issued an ultimatum to the doctors to return to work by September 7 or face the consequences. The doctors are pursuing their claim.

South Africa autoworkers strike

Workers covering the car components and fuel distribution sectors have been on strike for the last two weeks demanding a 15 percent pay increase and other benefits. The strike is having a big impact on car manufacturers because of the dwindling components supply.

Striking workers held a march and rally in Boksburg on Wednesday.

According to an Eyewitness News report, the Retail Motor Industry said it had reached an agreement with the workers' trade union, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). NUMSA spokesman Castro Ngobese said, "We are taking the revised offer to our members, because the latest offer is worth being considered by our members", adding a mandate from the members would be needed. The article gave no details of the new offer.

NUMSA had to issue a statement the previous day denying claims by the employers that they had reached an amicable agreement with the union. Last week the workers rejected a revised offer from the employers of 10 percent.



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