Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

14 October 2010

Slovakian workers demonstrate against austerity measures

Several thousand workers gathered in the main SNP Square in Bratislava, Slovakia on October 12 to protest the government's austerity measures. Following the protest, the crowd marched towards the parliament building. The demonstration was one of three that took place Tuesday. Regional protests also took place in Košice and ?ilina.

The government of Prime Minister Iveta Radicova is implementing an austerity programme including a total of €1.7 billion in cuts. Some €970 million is to come from spending cuts—about one-seventh of the state budget. Another €730 million is to be raised from tax increases. These include an increase from 19 percent to 20 percent on value added tax on food and other products.

The pay of state employees, or numbers of staff, will be slashed by 10 percent. Further cuts will be made by reducing money spent on capital investments.

According to the Trades Union Confederation (KOZ), the austerity measures will increase costs for an average family of four by €400 a year. This amount equates to the average monthly wage of a factory worker.

The global economic crisis has had a major impact on the Slovakian economy, which shrank by 4.7 percent last year. This is in contrast to the 10.4 percent growth it saw in 2007. The Slovak budget deficit is expected to reach 7.8 percent of GDP this year. The government is planning to bring it below the European Union-required 3 percent by 2013.

The protest is the latest in a string of strikes and demonstrations across Europe against austerity cuts and public finance reforms aimed at lowering national budget deficits.

Oxford University Press staff strike warehouse strike in Corby, England

Staff at Oxford University Press's (OUP) warehouse in Corby took industrial action October 12-13 in response to the company offering a 2 percent wage increase for this year, which has been overwhelmingly rejected.

Employees have demanded a 4.2 percent increase. The staff had a wage freeze last year, when other employees at OUP received an increase of 2 percent. A further two days of strike action are planned for next week. The combined turnover of OUP in 2009 and 2010 was £500 million.

Air Lingus cabin crew staff threaten work-to-rule

Irish Times reported October 13 that cabin crew employed at Aer Lingus "have threatened to go on strike if the airline disciplines any member taking part in industrial action which begins today."

The planned action by the airline workers consisted of a work-to-rule in an escalation of a dispute with Aer Lingus over new rosters.

The airline maintains the new rosters are an "essential part" of a binding arbitration agreement on an overall €90 million cost-saving plan known as Greenfield. The union, however, says the changes being sought go beyond the scope of the arbitration, and it has instructed members to revert to previous rosters.

Last week the airline warned cabin crew that they could be removed from the payroll and face possible dismissal if they failed to comply with their published rosters.

The union said it did not expect that the work-to-rule would in any way cause disruption or delay to flight services.

Luxembourg medical staff set to strike against health reforms

Thousands of medical staff are expected to take strike action at the end of the month to oppose government health reforms. All services, bar emergency treatment, will be placed on hold during the industrial action, according to the AAMD medical union's general secretary Claude Schummer.

The AMMD said its members were concerned that the reform, which gives the state greater control, would mean an end to patients being able to choose which doctor to visit.

The health reform also grants greater rights to pharmacists to prescribe a different treatment to the drugs prescribed by the doctor. Also of concern in the dispute is a proposal to place the personal details of patients on a national database.

Strike threat at Hewlett Packard UK in dispute over job losses

Workers employed at personal computer firm Hewlett Packard (HP) could take industrial action across the country if the company goes ahead with plans to cut 1,300 jobs.

HP claims the redundancies, announced October 11, are necessary because of business "tail-off" and to make the best use of "shoring opportunities".

The dispute could affect IT services to central government, including the Department for Work and Pensions and Ministry of Defence.

In 2009 HP declared global profits of $8 billion and its then chief executive Mark Hurd received a total reward package of $24 million.

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Workers at Tyneside Safety Glass set to strike

Workers at Tyneside Safety Glass in Gateshead, England are to take two weeks of continuous strike action beginning October 18, against the company's imposition of a second year of pay freezes, combined with changes to shift patterns.

The 73 workers involved at Tyneside Safety Glass, Team Valley, Gateshead, began their dispute September 20.

In some cases the shift changes have added 10 hours to the working week, taking workers up to the maximum 48-hour working week. Workers fear that the shift patterns will give them little or no family life. Also basic pay is barely above the national minimum wage and a further year of pay freezes will see employees' pay fall even closer to the minimum wage.

Sacked workers stage protest outside rights council HQ in Egypt

Around 50 workers and their families, along with supporters and lawyers, gathered outside the headquarters of the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) and the National Council for Women (NCW) October 10 to protest "arbitrary and punitive layoffs" and demand reinstatement.

A delegation of workers and lawyers met with officials from the state-appointed NCHR and NCW to receive pledges that their grievances would be forwarded and investigated within 15 days. Neither the NCHR nor the NCW have the authority to reinstate workers.

Reporters were barred from attending the meeting.

The demonstrators are considering staging another protest at the state-run Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) on October 17. The workers previously staged a protest and sleep-in at ETUF headquarters in September.

The sacked workers, who are from 10 public and private sector companies, have organized a campaign entitled "We will not be afraid". According to their leaflet, the campaign aims at: having the ETUF cancel punitive layoff orders and arbitrary deductions in pay; halting trumped-up charges against workers before the courts; providing assistance payments to sacked workers; and providing transportation fees for those workers who are punitively relocated until they can be reinstated in their original workplaces.

Workers involved are from the state-owned Mahalla Textile Company, the Petrotrade Company (affiliated with the Ministry of Petroleum), Rural Health Guides (female workers affiliated with the Ministry of Health in the Assiut Governorate), the private Misr-Iran Textile Company, Ameriya Textile Company, Indorama Shebine Textile Company, Mansoura-Espagna Textile Company, and the Future Company for Pipe Production.

Rural Health Guide Mona Abdel Same'a said: "Thirty-three of us have been working with the Health Ministry in Assiut for at least 16 years now. Now they want to employ us on new temporary contracts and strike off all the bonuses and benefits that we earned during our service." She added that the Rural Health Guides had been laid off after rejecting the new temporary contracts.

Karim Reda, a former employee of the Petrotrade Company, sacked in December 2009 for attempting to establish a trade union for company employees, said: "Four employees, myself included, were punitively sacked for our organizational efforts."

Cairo information centre employees stage new protest

Hundreds of employees at the information centre staged a protest opposite the Shura Council in Cairo, Egypt last week, after security authorities refused to authorize a protest in front of the Council of Ministers.

The protesters demanded that promises of better pay and benefits be fulfilled. Some of those demonstrating carried banners and chanted slogans including, "What are we supposed to do with LE99?" (€12).

Staff said they had received pledges from parliamentary officials that a decree ordering increases in their salaries, according to qualifications, would be issued and that they would be given permanent positions.

The employees ended a sit-in, held nearly three weeks ago in front of the Council of Ministers, following new promises from the Head of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation Hussein Megawer. The new protest was organized as none of the pledges made have been honoured.

Unpaid workers at two Iranian factories take strike action

Workers at two plants in the south of Iran struck last week to demand unpaid wages, RFE/RL's Radio Farda reported this week.

An employee at Kaghaz Pars Haftapeh, a paper mill in southwestern Iran, told Radio Farda October 7 on condition of anonymity that workers have not been paid for three months.

He added that "the plant's retired workers have not received their pensions since last year—they live in absolute poverty."

A similar situation with unpaid wages has reportedly arisen at several plants in the southern port city of Asalouyeh, a key industrial hub. Workers at a petrochemical plant in Asalouyeh also took industrial action last week to demand payment of unpaid wages.

A worker at the petrochemical plant told Radio Farda that Iran is feeling the impact of international sanctions imposed by the UN, US and EU. "The companies here have financial problems and difficulties securing components as a result of the international sanctions," he said.

Sierra Leone health workers in sit-down strike over pay discrimination

Over 4,000 health workers, members of the Sierra Leone Health Service Workers' Union, have begun a sit-down strike over pay discrimination. The union general secretary, Ansu Kalokoh, explained that the Ministry of Health and Sanitation has recently awarded pay rises to doctors, nurses, midwives and laboratory staff. However, other workers employed by the ministry, such as nurses' aides, porters and cleaners, were not included in the pay deal.

Botswana diamond workers strike

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Workers employed at the Diamond Trading Company (DTC) of Botswana began strike action Monday. DTC is a joint venture between De Beers and the Botswana government. The strike, which had overwhelming support, is in pursuit of an 8 percent pay increase and improved allowances. Management has offered 6 percent.

Botswana is the biggest producer of diamonds and production this year is expected to be up a third on last year.

Court order stops planned Kenyan airline workers strike

A strike by around 5,000 members of the Aviation and Allied Workers Union (AAWU), working for Kenya Airlines, due to start October 13, has been put on hold following a court ruling.

The planned strike was over the disputed back-dating of a pay agreement won in April of this year following previous strike action.

The Industrial Court prohibited the planned strike action and will bind both parties to further talks over the disputed claim.

Kogi state, Nigeria government workers strike

State government workers in the Central state of Kogi began strike action Monday. According to the *Nigerian Tribune*, state government workers across the state, including teachers, are supporting the action.

Amongst the demands of the strikers is the reinstatement of state government workers who lost their jobs following a screening exercise 17 months ago. Amongst their other demands are calls for promotion for some workers and payment of outstanding leave and salary payments.

The secretary of the Kogi state chapter of the Nigeria Labour Congress told the *Nigerian Tribune* the strike would hold till all their demands were met.

Nigeria: Academic staff in southeastern states declare indefinite strike action

Striking academics belonging to the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in the southeastern states have agreed to continue their three-month-old strike. They began strike action over the refusal of the southeastern states to implement the 2009 agreement between the ASUU and the federal government, the inadequate funding of education and the poor state of the education infrastructure.

Professor Ukachukwu Awuzie, ASUU president, condemned the state governments for refusing to meet the union demands and said the strike would continue indefinitely. He added that some of the lecturers have left their posts to take up jobs in other states because of the state governments' refusal to address the union's demands.

ASUU members began a three-day strike on Monday in support of their southeastern colleagues.

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