

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.

Belgian rail strike forces Europe-wide cancellations

A 24-hour strike October 17-18 was mounted against reforms in rail freight transport that will cost hundreds of drivers' jobs.

The strike forced the cancellation of almost all high-speed rail service in and out of the country and severely disrupted the national network. There was no rail traffic between the Netherlands and Belgium. Neither were Thalys high-speed trains running between Amsterdam and Paris.

The action severely affected all international trains linking Belgium to France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands and led to huge traffic jams.

A spokesman for Belgian rail network operator Infrabel told the *Belga* news agency, "Not one train is rolling in [the Southern province of] Wallonia or in Brussels. In [the Northern province of] Flanders, only a handful of trains are moving".

On the first morning of strike action, Belgian motorists faced 350 kilometres of gridlock on many motorways.

Italian academics protest

The beginning of the Italian academic year has been delayed in dozens of universities, as the *ricercatori*, or assistant professors, staged a series of protests throughout the country. Half the country's 20,000 assistant professors refused to teach non-obligatory classes to protest against budget cuts and current reforms.

Cuts to research budgets, university funding and a freeze on automatic salary increments have left many assistant professors teaching virtually for free, according to Alessandro Ferretti, spokesperson for the Assistant Professors Network, Rete29Aprile, who said the reforms would only worsen their situation.

279 million euros (US\$387 million) was cut from the university sector in 2009, according to one of the main education unions, Federazione Lavoratori della Conoscenza (FLC-CGIL). This figure is set to increase dramatically over the next two years with cuts of more than 3 billion euros over the 2010-12 triennial.

Oxford University Press warehouse staff to strike again

Around 90 workers employed at the Saxon Way, Corby, warehouse of Oxford University Press (OUP) are to begin a second round of industrial action this week, over the 2010 wage offer.

Staff staged an initial 24-hour strike on October 12-13, following a strike ballot that overwhelmingly rejected a 2 percent wage offer. Last year, the warehouse workers accepted a wage freeze.

The 90 workers, who will soon be moved to new warehouse space at Prologis Park, Kettering, are seeking an increase of 4.2 percent to offset last year's loss. The combined turnover of OUP in 2009 and 2010 was £500 million.

Further industrial action is scheduled for October 28 and November 3.

Greek archaeologists strike to oppose police attack

Archaeologists called a 24-hour nationwide strike for October 21 and invited the country's intellectual community to declare its opposition to last week's police attack on a strike by workers at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism at the Acropolis.

According to the *Athens News Agency*, the archaeologists "also called on the Greek people to join the effort to protect the cultural heritage that belongs to everybody. The statement issued underlined that the Archaeological Service is being systematically undermined by being understaffed and underfinanced".

Workers at Romanian finance ministry protest pay cuts

Thousands of Romanian finance ministry workers were involved in a walkout October 13, against bonus cuts, and in opposition to the government's International Monetary Fund-mandated austerity drive.

The media said about 4,000 workers from the finance ministry, employment offices and city halls in Bucharest and other cities had joined the protests. They started when about 200 employees in the finance ministry's headquarters refused to go to work and instead queued in front of Minister Gheorghe Ialomitanu's office, booing and barring him from leaving the building until late evening under police escort. Some shouted "Thieves!" as Ialomitanu returned from talks with the prime minister. One held a poster saying, "We are working, and you are stealing!"

Most of the clerks spent the night at work and pledged to continue their protest until Ialomitanu ordered that scrapped bonuses and other incentives get paid. Romania's Realitatea TV reported that regional units which collect taxes had yet to join the protest, but that if they did so, state coffers would be seriously affected.

Romania, the European Union's second-poorest member state, has

taken several measures including a 25 percent cut in state wages to stick within International Monetary Fund terms for a 20 billion euro bailout.

Protests against pension reform in Slovenia

Hundreds of workers gathered in front of the parliament house in the capital, Ljubljana, on October 18 to protest against the proposed pension reform and mini jobs legislation.

The *Slovenian Press Agency* reported “the protesters urged MPs not to put the two disputed items on the National Assembly’s plenary session agenda, although their calls appear to be in vain”.

Egyptian police attack workers demanding assistance payments by unions

On October 17, the police attacked a demonstration of dismissed workers and their supporters at the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), where they were protesting to demand unemployment assistance payments.

“This is the latest incident in a series of police crackdowns on workers’ protests in downtown Cairo, in what is believed by some to be one of a range of measures to tame dissent ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections slated for the end of November”, reported *Al Masry Al Youm*.

The protestors remained within the ETUF building for several hours, until “workers received pledges from federation officials that the monthly assistance payments would be delivered. Most workers left upon receiving the promises, but around a dozen activists and a few workers remained within the ETUF headquarters, where they said they intended to sleep-in until they received the payments”.

Central Security Forces were deployed at the entrance of the building while police and plain-clothed security moved in to forcefully clear out remaining demonstrators. A nurse, a youth activist, and at least two workers were reportedly beaten, and one of the workers, Samir al-Qazaz from the Indorama Shebin Textile Company, was pushed down a flight of stairs, seriously injuring his back and leg.

Police forces were previously deployed within the ETUF headquarters September 1, where many of the same workers had been sitting in.

The workers managed to secure their assistance payments from the ETUF the following day.

Around 500 workers from the Information Centres for Local Development (ICLD) say that they will not end the sit-in they began October 19 at the EFTU building—the latest in a nine-year battle ICLD workers have led for parity with other government employees.

Workers held banners reading, “Save us.... The ministers are drowning us”, and chanted anti-government and anti-EFTU slogans.

Daily News Egypt said that during the past nine years the majority of the 32,000 ICLD workers “have been repeatedly promised that they would be made permanent employees and receive pay increases and health and pension benefits. The latest of these promises was made in May, after ICLD workers staged a sit-in outside parliament”.

Workers staged another protest in September after this promise was also reneged on. On October 11, security forces broke up a protest workers staged outside the Shoura Council.

Palestinian workers strike on non payment of minimum wage

On 19 October, 72 Palestinian workers went on strike at the Israeli Soul Or factory in the Tulkarem district, when it refused to pay them the minimum wage.

Workers demanded that the factory administration implement an Israeli labour law, passed in early 2008, requiring that Palestinians be paid the minimum wage. Muhammad Baleedy, the head of the workers’ union in the food and agriculture industries, told *Ma’an* that the factory’s management has responded to the requests by using foul language.

Baleedy said that six workers have died either on the job or afterwards due to cancer caused by the improper storage of chemicals. Workers who complain to the media are routinely fired, he added.

The owner of the factory is reportedly a general in the Israeli military. He moved the facility across the Green Line because the emissions from the factory did not meet Israeli health standards.

Zambian lottery workers strike

Around 40 workers at the State Lotteries board in Lusaka went on strike October 18 over salary arrears. The workers are members of the Zambia Union of Financial Institutions and Allied Workers.

The arrears of money over the last eight months amounts to 1.2 billion kwacha (US\$0.25 million). Union branch chairman, Kayonde Ngombo, called on the employers to quickly pay the arrears.

Liberian interns take action

Last week medical interns at the John F. Kennedy hospital in the Liberian capital, Monrovia, took limited action. The hospital is one of the largest in West Africa. The 14 doctors would only deal with critical cases that presented at the emergency ward.

The doctors—graduates from a local medical college—are protesting at their living and working conditions. According to the doctors, their accommodation consists of a tiny room with two beds and a makeshift window. Amongst their other complaints are the lack of proper duty call rooms and the fact that one of the doctors who has worked for six months has not been paid.

They are aggrieved at the superior treatment, pay and conditions meted out to foreign doctors at the hospital.

Kenyan paper workers demonstrate

Former workers from the Pan Paper mills in Webuye, Kenya, held a demonstration over unpaid salary on October 19. The 700 workers were laid off two weeks ago and have not received their last payment. Some of the workers have pay arrears dating back to last November.

The workers are also aggrieved at the lack of information about the future of the mill. The government has said the plan is to reopen the mill, but currently funds for this are not available. The mill reopened briefly in August for a few days to coincide with a visit by President Kibaki, but closed after the visit finished.

Kenyan tea workers strike

Around 80,000 tea plantation workers began strike action Monday, following the introduction of tea plucking machinery the workers fear will destroy their jobs. The strike at a plantation in Rift Valley province had total support according to the Central Organisation of Trade Unions Secretary General Francis Atwoli.

The company had been granted a court order to declare the strike illegal, but the workers were urged by Atwoli to continue their action saying companies had failed to honour an earlier agreement not to introduce more machines than had been agreed on a trial basis. Tea is Kenya's second largest foreign exchange earner.

Nigerian doctors vote to continue action

Around 400 doctors belonging to the Medical Guild in Lagos, who have been on strike for the last nine weeks, voted Tuesday by an 80 percent majority to continue the strike. The doctors are striking to get their employer to implement the federally agreed Consolidated Medical Salary Scale (COMESS) and to reinstate the Guild chairman, Ibrahim Olaifa, who had been sacked.

Around a third of the Nigerian states have implemented COMESS.



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