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.*

Public transport workers, refuse workers, journalists strike in Greece

All public transport in Athens was halted on December 22, including the tram and metro system, as transport workers took the fourth 24-hour strike this month. The action comes in response to a bill passed by parliament December 15 reducing wages at state-controlled companies and making it easier for private-sector employers to fire workers and bypass collective bargaining agreements.

The changes are part of the conditions put forward by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund in exchange for a €110 billion bailout for the Greek financial sector.

Further action by transport workers in the lead-up to Christmas was called off by the trade unions, however.

A three-hour work stoppage by public-sector workers, including teachers, dock workers, employees from the state-controlled Public Power Corp. SA and Hellenic Railways and bank employees, also took place on the same day.

Refuse workers in Athens remain on strike after three weeks, resulting in sacks of rubbish piling up around the capital.

On December 16, journalists caused a news blackout as they went on a 48-hour strike to protest the government's austerity plan. Television channels aired pre-recorded material, the country's normal news programming was suspended, radio stations played back-to-back music and newspapers ceased publication.

Thousands protest Spanish austerity measures

Thousands marched across the country December 18 to protest austerity measures and threatened a general strike for next month if the government does not back down on plans to raise the retirement age from 65 to 67 years.

The day before, Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero had pledged to push ahead with the changes to pensions regardless of popular opposition.

Even though the Spanish government has cut spending and promised more attacks on the living conditions of millions, the ratings agency Moody's put the country on review for a possible downgrade last week. The fourth largest economy in the eurozone, Spain is under scrutiny from international markets which are speculating on whether it will be forced to apply for a European Union bailout after Ireland was granted an €85 billion package last month.

Warning strike by German power workers

Several thousand workers at the country's largest electricity producer, RWE, participated in a warning strike December 16, over a pay dispute. Around 28,000 workers are demanding 6.5 percent more pay for 12 months, retroactively from November 1, and point to the fact that RWE has been posting record profits for years.

RWE's latest offer is said to have worked out as less than 3 percent from January for 16 months and a one-off payment.

The strike—which included brown coal miners at Inden, the nearby Weisweiler power plant (both in North Rhine-Westphalia) and at the Trier network activities (in Rhineland-Palatinate)—disrupted mining, network and generation activities.

Further action has been proposed at coal-fired and nuclear stations to exert pressure on an RWE supervisory board meeting at the Essen headquarters of the group, to resolve the pay dispute.

The next series of stoppages are expected to focus on the Neurath, Frimmersdorf, Niederaussem, Goldenberg, and Gersteinwerk coal plants, the nuclear plants Lingen, Gundremmingen and Biblis (limited to demonstrations), as well as the Essen headquarters of the group.

Workers' strike shuts Eiffel Tower

On December 15, workers employed at the Eiffel Tower—the most visited tourist site in Paris—began an open-ended strike to protest against bullying management techniques.

Staff at the company that operates the site were fighting against "psychological pressure, stress-inducing managerial policies and a management that is deaf to the complaints of its employees," read a statement.

Heinz food workers in Wigan, England strike in pay dispute

Staff employed at the Heinz food conglomerate's plant in Wigan, north west England, took strike action Tuesday in a dispute over pay. The workers, members of the Unite trade union, have rejected a two-year pay offer of 3.3 percent and 3 percent.

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The action was the second one-day stoppage of the dispute and resulted in 2 million cans being lost from production, according to Unite.

Following the failure to reach an agreement at subsequent talks between the company and Unite at the conciliation service Acas, a further 24 hours strike is scheduled for December 29.

Local authority employees in West Yorkshire, England vote for strike action over job cuts

Thousands of workers at Kirklees Council in West Yorkshire, England could go on strike in January after voting to take industrial action over plans for 700 compulsory redundancies by April. In a ballot of the council's 7,500 Unison union members, 53 percent of those who voted backed industrial action.

It has not been decided what form the action would take, but the union has said a five-day strike in January was likely. Union officials said schools and gritting services would be hit hardest by any strike action.

Staff to vote on industrial action at major UK drink plant

Workers at a Ribena drinks factory in Coleford, Gloucestershire owned by GlaxoSmithKline (GSK)—the world's third largest pharmaceutical company—are to vote over possible industrial action in protest at the refusal of the company to offer its staff a pay increase.

The Unite union said more than 200 engineers, administrators, analysts and warehouse staff would be balloted by January 14 over action following unsuccessful negotiations with the company since June.

Britain's second-largest pharmaceutical company, AstraZeneca, was hit by walkouts over pension cuts three months ago, while France's Sanofi-Aventis has been in dispute with workers over plans to axe hundreds of jobs.

In relation to the pharmaceutical industry Europe-wide, Reuters recently noted: "expiring patents on blockbuster drugs and growing pressure on prices are threatening future revenues across the industry, prompting a tougher attitude to labour costs by management teams."

Truckers strike in Egypt set to enter third week

As of December 22, around 70,000 truck drivers and owners were continuing their strike action, begun on December 10, against government measures including tax hikes, and banning truck drivers from using highways on Thursdays and Fridays.

The ministry revoked the tax increase on December 14 but the strike continues as other demands remain unmet and drivers claim that local tax authorities continue to enforce the revoked tax.

On December 16 and 20, hundreds of striking drivers marched to the parliament building in central Cairo and held protests. The workers said police dressed in civilian clothes sought to intimidate them into ending their strike.

Liberian dockers in strike action

Dockers at Monrovia, Liberia employed by the National Port Authority (NPA), belonging to the Dock Workers Union of Liberia (DOWUL), took strike action last Friday. Their action brought the whole port to a standstill. They took the action over redundancy terms.

The Liberian government recently signed a 25-year deal with the Danish company APM Terminals to take over most of the operations at the Freeport of Monrovia, which will result in some downsizing.

The union president, Jomah Kesselly, explained the dockers were seeking severance payments of around US$5,000 but that management were offering a minimum of only US$1,000.

Beyan Kesselly, the NPA board chairman who is also maritime commissioner, described the action as unlawful and that if they did not return to work they could be dismissed.

Following discussion between management and the union, the dockers returned to work, whilst further talks on severance terms took place.

Nigerian power workers threaten strike action

Workers at the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), members of the Nigerian Union of Electricity Employees (NUEE), have given three weeks' notice of strike action if their demands are not met.

Amongst their demands are a 150 percent pay increase, to stop the practice of using casual workers and for the withdrawal of soldiers deployed at PHCN sites. According to the NUEE secretary general, Joe Ajaero, the government has so far only implemented 13 percent of the previously agreed 150 percent pay increase.

Ajaero also alleged the abuse of NUEE members by the police and many arrests in protests held by NUEE members throughout Nigeria last week.

Zimbabwe: Council workers threaten strike action over unpaid wages

Municipal workers in Chitungwiza, members of the Zimbabwe Urban and Rural District Council Workers' Union (ZURDCWU), said they would take strike action this week if their November wages and bonuses were not paid.

A union official explained most of the workers have not received their wages or a 13th cheque that they normally receive in November. He said only a third of the workers have received their money. The council workers have had to take strike action in the past over non-payment of wages.

ZURDCWU also noted municipal workers in other areas have gone without pay for several months; those in Chinhoyi not having been paid for the last 17 months.

Tanzanian rail workers set to strike

Workers belonging to the Zambia Railway Workers Union, employed by the Tanzania Zambia Railway Authority (TZARA), have threatened strike action. Amongst their demands are for new salary scales, a grievance procedure and for the human resources manager to be replaced.

The workers recently took part in a go-slow as part of their demands for the replacement of the human resources manager. The Tanzania

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employees say their conditions are worse than the workers employed in the Zambia section of TZARA and are calling for parity.

TZARA has recently received a US$39 million interest-free loan from the Chinese government to upgrade the line and buy new rolling stock. China imports resources such as copper from Zambia, which are shipped out by rail across Zambia on to Tanzania where they can shipped from the coast.

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