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 civil aviation employees strike declared illegal

This week, the Greek civil aviation employees union (OSYPA) called off a 48-hour strike scheduled for December 29. The planned 48-hour stoppage was declared illegal by an Athens first-instance court, after the intervention of management at the Civil Aviation Service (CAS).

After the planned strike was declared illegal, OSYPA stated that it would resort to other forms of protest against the government's plans, which include mandatory transfers of some 500 mechanics and pilots of the former Olympic Airways who are currently employed by the CAS. The union called the strike off Tuesday after a meeting with transport ministry officials. OSYPA said they had received assurances that some of their demands will be met.

Workers in the transport sector have said their strikes will continue after the Christmas holidays. Bus drivers and staff in Athens are planning work stoppages on January 3, 5 and 10.

On New Year's Day, drivers employed on the Athens metro and the Piraeus-Kifissia urban electric railway are to strike for 24 hours to protest the social democratic PASOK government's plans to cut public transport provision as part of its austerity programme.

Northern Rail conductors in England walk out over bank holiday pay

Around 1,000 train conductors took strike action December 27 and 28, in a dispute over bank holiday pay.

The Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union said it wants conductors to receive double pay for working on bank holidays.

Northern Rail ran a limited service on a handful of routes on the two days. Many trains between the major conurbations of Manchester, Liverpool, Preston, Leeds and Newcastle did not run. Routes between Carlisle, Sheffield and York and out of Stoke were affected.

Strike action has also been threatened to coincide with the Royal Wedding bank holiday in April next year, unless Northern Rail restarts talks to resolve the dispute.

Drivers for Arriva Trains Wales also held a 24-hour stoppage over pay and conditions December 27.

London Tube drivers in stoppage over pay and conditions

London subway drivers took industrial action on the traditionally busy shopping day December 26 (Boxing Day), affecting every line, after London Underground (LU) lost a legal challenge.

Tube drivers walked out over a claim for triple pay and a day off in lieu. RMT London district organiser Steve Grant said, "It's been 100 percent solid from our members and it seems other unions' members have supported our action without any picket lines at all.

"The company was forcing people who had booked today off to work and only paying them flat time."

Heinz workers stage 24-hour strike in Wigan, England

A total of 1,200 Heinz workers staged a 24-hour walkout Wednesday night at a plant in Wigan, Greater Manchester, that produces baked beans and soups. The action is the third strike held by the workers since their rejection of the firm's pay offer. A Heinz spokesman claims the two-year pay offer is 4 percent this year and 3 percent in 2011 and would be performance-related. According to the Unite trade union, the pay offer is worth 3.3 percent this year and 3 percent for 2011.

The factory produces 2 million cans of beans and soup every day. The plant in Wigan is one of Heinz's oldest in the UK and has been in operation for more than 50 years. Heinz sells 442 million tins of beans a year in the UK.

Spanish footballers strike over pay and game fixtures

The president of the Spanish Footballers Association (AFE), Luis Rubiales, announced this week that footballers will go on strike January 2 and will ask the National Court to rule that the five games programmed on the day be suspended.

The AFE is in dispute with the Spanish Football League over the scheduling of games at various times across January 2, but Rubiales has said that the players were only willing to play fixtures between 17:00 and 19:00 CET on this date, and that they have the full backing of the clubs.

Players in Albacete, Mallorca, and Xerez had apparently also not been given guarantees of payment promised.

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Egyptian port workers stage sit-in over wage delays and fees

Around 950 workers employed by the Cruiser Passengers Baggage Porters Association at the Safaga Red Sea port, south of Hurghada, began an open-ended strike December 23 over wage delays and the imposition of additional fees.

The workers said the association instituted an LE300 monthly fee to secure necessary entry permits, as well as LE1500 for insurance and LE100 per month for luggage trolley rentals.

The port workers called for the cancellation of fees and the prompt payment of their wages.

Egypt: Medical workers protest relocation of psychiatric hospital

Dozens of doctors and nurses from the Abbaseyya Psychiatric Hospital held a demonstration December 26, after the government decided to relocate the hospital to some 80 kilometres outside of Cairo.

The daily *Al-Dostor* quoted government sources as having said that there is currently a plan to remove the psychiatric hospital from its current location in Cairo to make way for an expansion of the neighbouring Cairo Exhibition Centre.

The demonstrators, including representatives of prominent medical associations, carried banners reading, “No to sale, no to transfer, no to demolition.”

“This medical and educational building treats some 80,000 patients annually,” said Dr. Abdel Moneim Abu al-Fatouh, head of the Arab Doctors Union. “Why does the government insist on seizing the land on which it is situated?”

In 2004, there was opposition to a proposal to replace the hospital with a Carrefour hypermarket.

“The government acts only in its own interest while turning a blind eye to deteriorating public health conditions,” Mohamed Said, a nurse at the Abbaseyya hospital, told *Al-Masry Al-Youm.* Mohamed Shata, the 80-year-old father of one hospital patient, said, “If the plan is carried out, I won’t be able to visit my son as frequently I used to.”

According to the Cairo-based Egyptian Centre for Development and Human Rights, the planned relocation will place a heavy burden on the roughly 1,500 psychiatrists, nurses, social workers and administrators who currently work at the hospital. It will also impose extra financial and psychological burdens on the families of patients.

The Abbaseyya Psychiatric Hospital is the largest psychiatric hospital in the Middle East region. It dates back to 1883, when it was founded to cater to patients in both the Cairo and Giza governorates. The hospital contains 2,000 inpatient beds, treats approximately 80,000 outpatients each year, and is the only facility in Egypt to offer training in psychiatric nursing.

Protest outside Israeli Knesset against closure of hospital

Around 100 staff employed at the 143-year-old Bikur Cholim Hospital demonstrated December 28 outside Israel’s Knesset (parliament building), against the institution’s closure.

Long-time staff at the hospital, who have become used to irregular and inadequate wages from the financially troubled hospital and face the prospect of no pensions, said other medical centres would be able to hire only 50 to 100 of them, leaving more than 500 without jobs.

Bikur Cholim Hospital serves the haredi community. Its buildings are owned by Russian-Israeli businessman Arkadi Gaydamak, but it is operated by a non-profit voluntary organisation. It has run out of funding amid accusations of corruption.

Bikur Cholim would be the first hospital closure in the history of the Israeli state and comes when the health system lacks many hundred of beds.

Turkish construction workers protest outside Turkish embassy in Tel Aviv, Israel

Around 800 construction workers from Turkey protested in front of the Turkish Embassy in Tel Aviv, Israel, on December 28, demanding that the Turkish and Israeli governments renew the trade agreement that allows them to work in Israel legally.

The workers are employed at the Yilmazlar Construction Group, which has carried out several projects in Israel as part of a military trade agreement between the two countries. The contract that allows Yilmazlar to operate in Israel is set to expire at the end of the year. So far, Ankara has failed to renew the agreement amid tensions between the two governments.

Fearing the impact on lucrative projects, the company has asked that the Israeli Foreign Ministry allow its employees an extension of their work permits until Ankara decides whether to renew the trade agreement.

Strike at Israeli defence electronics firm over post-merger future

The workforce at defence electronics company Elisra Group launched a 24-hour strike, December 26, over fears for jobs in light of a company merger and uneven bonus payments.

Elbit Systems Ltd. owns 70 percent of Elisra, and Israel Aerospace Industries Ltd. (IAI) owns 30 percent. Following Elbit Systems’ acquisition of its stake in 2006, Elisra employees have been concerned about its plans to merge the company with Elbit’s other units, effectively liquidating the company.

A few months ago, an agreement was reached under which Elisra and all its employees would move to new premises to be built in Holon, but the Histadrut (General Trade Union Federation in Israel) said that it recently learned that there are no building permits for the building, and that management wants to move groups of Elisra employees to various facilities.

Histadrut also alleges that Elisra distributed large bonuses to employees with personal contracts, but small bonuses to the employees covered by the collective labour contract. The employees claim the management of Elisra and Elbit Systems are pressurising employees to give up their collective contracts to get better compensation.

Workers for armoured car maker in Israel lock factory gates

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Around 100 workers at the armoured car and firefighting vehicle maker Hatehof locked the gates of the company's Nazareth factory in Israel on December 23. They were protesting non-payment of wages for the previous six weeks. The company has also stopped employer contributions to the workers' pensions.

Hatehof has made an advance payment of NIS 2,000 per employee, but striking workers say that they would not unlock the gates until they are paid in full. Non-payment of salaries and benefits to employees is a signal that the factory is about to close, said Histadrut Northern Valley District chairman Leon Peretz.

Turkish aviation workers protest against dismissals from Istanbul airport

Around 120 workers fired by the company that manages Istanbul's international airport held a protest two weeks ago, demanding that the administration reinstate all workers.

The Istanbul Sabiha Gökçen International Airport Investment Development and Operation Inc. (ISG) is said to have dismissed the workers without following all the procedures required by Turkish law.

A report on the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) published December 23 stated, "Protesting workers left a black wreath in front of the building, denouncing anti-union tactics employed by the ISG top management."

The ITF said that workers had been attempting to gain trade union recognition. The ITF added, "Gaining union recognition is a long process in Turkey, and the company has used the time to act against the union. The dismissals occurred just after a court of appeal decision that would have brought the union a step closer to a collective bargaining agreement."

Kenyan airline workers dispute claims of settlement

The Aviation and Allied Workers Union (AAWU), representing airline workers at Kenyan Airline KQ, has denied management claims of a settlement in their ongoing dispute. The union called for strike action in support of their dispute in October of this year, but KQ went to court to prevent the strike.

Following a three-day strike last year for increased pay, the company and the union had a series of meetings that produced a settlement figure in April. However, no agreement could be reached over the settlement date. The union insisted it should be backdated to January 2008, while management wanted it backdated to October 2009.

KQ human resources manager Paul Kasimu released a statement saying the airline had reached a final agreement with the union. AAWU chairman Moses Ndiema denied this was the case. He said, "Nothing has been sorted out. Should these talks collapse, we will still call our members to go on strike."

Ugandan casual workers down tools on Christmas Eve

Around 30 young workers at the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in Atiak in northern Uganda took strike action Christmas Eve over unpaid wages. The workers seized a JICA vehicle in pursuit of their demand.

The workers were owed sh5.2m (US$2,200), according to a police report. JICA eventually paid the workers sh1.3m (US$ 560), leaving an outstanding balance of sh3.9m (US$1,700).

Nigerian lecturers' strike leads universities to suspend admissions

The prolonged strike action by academic staff in the South Eastern states of Nigeria—Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo—has led to universities suspending the admission of students for the 2011/2012 session.

The lecturers have been out on strike for three months, following the failure of the state governments to implement an enhanced pay structure approved by the federal government.

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