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.

Strike by city refuse collectors in Birmingham, England

Hundreds of refuse collectors in Britain's second city, Birmingham, took strike action following the suspension of two colleagues. Street cleaners and refuse collectors employed by Birmingham City Council had voted overwhelmingly in favour of an overtime ban and work to rule since December 20 for 24-hour periods, in response to pay cuts.

The city council, which claimed the suspensions were in response to a vehicle being blocked, has hired 200 casual staff as cover.

It said the suspensions followed a collection vehicle being blocked in and prevented from carrying out duties. The snow and ice over the Christmas break has led to a backlog of refuse left on streets.

The Unite union said almost 290 of its members working for Birmingham's refuse department would walk out on both January 13 and 14, in protest at plans to cut their pay by up to £4,000 a year. Unite regional secretary Gerard Coyne claimed the council was escalating the dispute by threatening to pay the refuse collectors by the amount of waste collected, rather than for their contracted hours.

Secondary school teachers at school in Rotherham, England strike over job cuts

Teachers at Rawmarsh Community (secondary) school in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, have started a three-day strike in protest over proposed job cuts.

The school is to lose 34 staff, including 15 teachers, in order to reduce a £1.3 million deficit.

Head teacher Stuart Wilson, who joined the school four months ago, claimed the school needed fewer teachers as pupil numbers had fallen sharply since 2008. He acknowledged that class sizes would increase as a result of the cuts.

Strike posed at French-based pharmaceutical corporation

Imminent industrial action has been threatened at pharmaceutical producer Sanofi-Aventis, headquartered in Paris, in opposition to a possible 916 job cuts. This is in addition to 2,700 jobs already shed since Sanofi and Aventis merged in 2005.

A walkout at Sanofi-Aventis, the world's fourth largest by prescription sales, would add to a growing list of recent strikes at major pharmaceutical corporations, including Merck in the Netherlands and AstraZeneca in England.

A union statement said that the job cuts were part of a €2 billion savings plan that group management aimed to achieve by 2013.

Editorial staff set to strike at Herald group newspapers in Scotland

Around 170 editorial staff at the Glasgow-based Herald group of newspapers, which includes the *Herald*, *Sunday Herald* and the *Evening Times*, supported taking strike action in protest at compulsory redundancies.

The proposed two-day strike follows the decision by publisher Newsquest to fire six employees and give another seven voluntary redundancy two days before Christmas. The strike received overwhelmingly backing in an emergency ballot, but according to the *Guardian* newspaper action could be postponed "because of fears it would damage this weekend's relaunch of the *Sunday Herald* as a single section 'news magazine', in a fresh effort to save it from closure.

"It is understood that the Herald group's management has resisted demands from Newsquest to close the Sunday title down entirely, only 11 years after it was launched, as a cost-saving measure."

Staff were already on a work to rule after Newsquest introduced new redundancy measures late last year, using a new "scoring" system and only basic statutory redundancy terms. The new scoring system allowed Newsquest managers to "square" any sickness absences, so if an employee was off sick twice, the number of days off would be squared.

One *Evening Times* journalist with multiple sclerosis allegedly lost his job, after his absences on health grounds were included in his "scoring".

Slaughterhouse workers in Cyprus to strike over unpaid wages

The workforce at the island's main slaughterhouse, the state-owned Kofinou plant, took a decision January 4 to go on strike over the management's failure to pay their 13th salary.

A union source said that workers were also anxious that they wouldn't receive their January wage. Workers at slaughterhouse imposed an overtime ban before the holidays. Strike dates are expected to be announced next week.

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Staff at Greek gambling operator in two-day strike

Staff working for Opap SA, the country's lottery and sports betting operator, have announced a two-day strike from January 7 to oppose the government's tax policies.

The two-day strike is likely to reduce Opap's revenue by about €40 million ($53.6 million) and the hit on profit could be as much as €4 million.

Opap holds a monopoly on Greek sports betting until 2020. The government holds a 35 percent stake in the company.

Strikes at Israel's big three ports in wage dispute

Around 2,500 dock workers at the country's three main ports, Haifa, Ashdod and Eilat, began strike action January 3, after reaching an impasse on wage talks with the government.

According to Israel's Histadrut trade union federation, negotiations have been ongoing with the government over a 5 percent wage increase.

On January 4, Agrexco, the country's leading agricultural exporter, revealed that it had been given an exemption from the present strike. "Agrexco has instructed all its growers to continue harvesting the seasonal fruits and picking peppers and tomatoes from the Arava region," the company said.

According to the company, 29 ships are presently waiting outside the ports. The Federation of Israeli Chambers of Commerce said that a week-long strike would cost the economy around Shk400 million (€85 million/$113 million).

Exports make up almost half of Israel's gross domestic product.

Israeli diplomatic staff step up actions

The country's foreign ministry employees and diplomats posted overseas have been in dispute with the government for several months in demanding salary increases.

Following a recent breakdown of negotiations with the Treasury, diplomatic staff stepped up their sanctions by refusing to issue entry visas to Israel, help Israeli ministers travelling abroad or coordinate diplomatic visits.

Israel has had to ask the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to postpone a planned visit, a senior official said. Diplomatic staff have also said they will not assist Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when he travels to Egypt this month. Last June, diplomats demonstrated their protest at the refusal to raise their salaries by going to work in jeans and sandals instead of suits.

The dispute has also witnessed some visiting foreign dignitaries finding themselves abandoned by their Israeli foreign ministry-assigned drivers and forced to ask their embassies to send cars.

Nigerian printers storm Lagos Assembly House

Printers working for the Lagos State Printing Corporation (LSPC) stormed the Lagos State parliament building on Tuesday, January 4. They were protesting the non-payment of staff salaries, the non-remittance of N28 million (US$184,000) statutory deductions and the non-payment of gratuities to pensioners.

The brunt of their anger was directed at LSPC General Manager, Bolaji Agaba. The LSPC union chairman, Lukman Rabiu, explained, "Before he (Agaba) became the general manager, the past administration ran the affairs of the corporation properly… [The] majority of our staff members are indebted to… the banks."

South African miners in strike action

Strike action by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) began on January 3, at TEBA, which supplies miners and employee services to the mining industry. Former NUM President James Motlasi has 75 percent ownership of TEBA.

Negotiations between the NUM and TEBA began back in October of last year. At that point the union demand was for a 15 percent wage rise and the company offer was 4 percent. The union was also seeking a minimum monthly wage of R1,500 (US$225), which currently stands at R1,000 (US$150). Currently the union demand is for an 8.5 percent pay increase while the company offer is 5 percent.

NUM spokesman Lesiba Seshoka, told the press that negotiations are likely to recommence next week.

South African coal miners stop work to honour dead colleague

Around 1,000 coal miners, members of the NUM, downed tools Tuesday to honour 58-year-old Petrus Sikupa. He died on December 26, succumbing to injuries to his spinal cord after the mine roof collapsed on him in June last year.

An NUM spokesman explained, "We have resolved that for every mineworker who dies we will take a day of mourning as a gesture to show the mining industry that they should take safety very seriously."

Around 150 miners are killed in South African mines each year. But there are a growing number of miners injured in the mines, dying as a result of those injuries at a later date. NUM spokesman Lesiba Seshoka stated, "We've seen an increase in the number of people who get injured at work and die at home."

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