

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 transport workers strike

Bus and metro drivers went on a 24-hour strike January 13, in protest against government plans for the restructuring of the country's cash-starved state-run transport sector.

On the same day as the industrial action, which ground most urban transportation to a halt across the country, the PASOK cabinet passed a bill merging urban transport companies and raising travel fares. The bill is expected to become law next month.

Also on January 13, around 200 demonstrators marched to the finance ministry, some holding banners reading, "We resist" and chanting, "Hands off transport!"

Transport workers have threatened to carry out further strike action in coming weeks.

The recent walkout was the latest in a series of public transport strikes in the last two months against the government's austerity policies, motivated in large part by the conditions attached to the €110 billion (\$144.5 billion) bailout package agreed last year with the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund.

Greek public sector workers to strike in February against austerity

Civil servants are to strike for 24 hours on February 10 in protest at government austerity measures.

Private sector workers including architects, lawyers and pharmacists, previously less affected by austerity than their colleagues in the public sector, have also come into conflict with the government in recent months.

Pharmacists called a series of rolling 24-hour strikes this week. A statement by the pharmacists' association said, "We reject the government's plans. We are against the moves to do away with the Greek drugstores. We are determined not to allow our eradication."

French dockers strike at two main ports

Dock workers at the country's two largest ports, Marseille and Le Havre, were involved in five days of strike action over working conditions.

Dockers and a large number of port staff at the northwestern port of Le Havre began strike action January 12 to demand early retirement rights for those engaged in sustained, hard physical work.

The Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) called on port workers and dockers to strike on alternating days and halt overtime, night and weekend shifts.

The Marseille and Fos general cargo terminals were blocked January 14, according to a spokeswoman for the port.

Nineteen container vessels had cancelled planned stops at the port of Le Havre up to January 14, while the docking of five bulk carriers was delayed. Petroleum shipping was not affected, said a source. National strikes late last year caused major disruption to shipments and oil terminals, particularly in the southern port of Marseille.

The union, government and management of cargo-handling companies are negotiating labour contracts under a 2008 law aimed at making French harbours more competitive. Under the plan, workers operating equipment such as cranes are to be moved from state-owned ports to privately run cargo handling companies in a bid to casualise shifts patterns.

Cabin crew dispute over new rosters escalates at Aer Lingus

Around 800 cabin crew at Dublin airport escalated their long-running work-to-rule at Aer Lingus, forcing it to cancel flights when the airline sought to impose contentious new rosters January 17.

Staff refused to work the new rosters, which they say exceed existing agreements and would impose undue hardship. Aer Lingus was forced to cancel at least a dozen international flights.

A company spokesman said a number of other staff had refused to operate flights under the new roster arrangements. He said the airline had managed to operate the flights concerned.

Aer Lingus warned cabin crew last week that failure to comply with the new rosters would result in them being put off duty and removed from the payroll.

The airline and cabin crew have been involved in a standoff for 14 weeks, ever since new rosters were proposed to bring down costs at the airline. The union Impact said its member had accepted they would have to work extra hours in the air, but that they had not agreed to new roster arrangements.

Around 50 cabin crew were instructed to attend individual meetings with management, from January 18, after refusing to work the new rosters. The airline has confirmed that 32 cabin crew members have been removed from the payroll and that 86 crew members have refused to operate the new schedules so far.

Four cabin crew based in Cork, and eight members based in Dublin, were told by the airline that they were being taken off duties because they had taken meal breaks while working a series of doubled duties after

working in excess of the required hours.

UK National Grid workers to strike over pay

The workforce at the country's central energy network operator, National Grid, one of the world's largest utilities, are to begin an indefinite period of industrial action from January 28.

Workers at the National Grid have voted 590 to 32 for action short of a strike in protest against a below-inflation, three-year pay offer of 2.5 percent for the first year and 2.25 percent for the second.

Staff will not cover sick or holiday leave for colleagues, or work overtime. A union source said last week that an escalation of the protests could hit National Grid's network operations and slow down transmission projects under construction.

The National Grid was fined £8 million on January 6 for misreporting progress on maintenance work and £15 million last year for different abuses.

Doncaster council workers to ballot on strike action over cuts

Doncaster council are to be balloted on industrial action over spending cuts that will lead to as many as 2,000 job losses.

The council has already announced up to 700 workers are expected to go under voluntary redundancy packages. Hundreds have already left. The authority is forcing through cuts of £80 million over the next three years, with more jobs expected to go next year.

Cambridge dons in silent protest against changes to higher education

Academics gather in opposition to government changes planned for higher education.

Hundreds of Cambridge University dons held a three minutes silence January 17, in protest against devastating government changes to higher education. Some dressed in traditional attire of black gowns and hoods. The academics assembled opposite the university's Senate House.

Organisers of the protest said they wanted to show "discontent" with the government's plans to introduce higher tuition fees, cut state funding of higher education by tens of millions of pounds and enforce the "marketisation" of universities.

They said they were unhappy that their university had not spoken out against the government changes. Ruth Watson, a lecturer in African history, said the university's "strategy was to maintain a silence in the hope that the problem of higher education funding went away."

Ian Patterson, a fellow in English at Queens' College, said he was protesting because an increase in fees would "deter some students from coming to university" and would be accompanied by a "huge reduction in government funding, particularly from research and teaching and the arts, humanities and social sciences.

"This short-sighted policy appears to have no understanding of the importance of these areas of cultural life, seeing higher education only as a route to personal prosperity and national economic productivity. We insist that the university is not, in its core functions, a business, but a place of free intellectual activity and the pursuit of knowledge without regard to

its economic ends."

From autumn 2012, universities will be allowed to charge tuition fees of up to £9,000 a year. Currently, the maximum is £3,290 a year. University budgets will be cut by almost £400 million a year before they begin to charge higher fees. Last October's spending review cut the higher education budget from £7.1 billion to £4.2 billion by 2014.

Journalists at the BBC's Arabic Service strike

Journalists at the BBC's Arabic Service held a 48-hour strike January 14 in a dispute over management-imposed work rotas, which reporters say will disrupt their lives and increase levels of work-related stress.

Over 160 journalists across the Arabic service are involved. Correspondents in Iraq and Tunisia also joined the action.

Picketing took place until midnight outside the BBC Arabic Service, Egton House headquarters beside Broadcasting House in London.

Output was significantly disrupted, with many live TV and radio programmes replaced with pre-records.

Iranian tire factory workers resume strike

Workers at the 1,400-strong Alborz tire factory in Eslamshahr, 10 kilometers outside of Tehran, resumed their strike over wages last week. They reportedly received only 50 percent of their back pay, which still includes four months' worth of salaries and a New Year's bonus from last year.

The workforce first went on strike in October, but ended their action after receiving some back wages along with a promise of a loan from the Industry Ministry to help the company pay back wages. The Alborz factory has witnessed a series of protests and strikes in recent years over unpaid wages.

A large increase was seen in 2010 in the arbitrary arrest of workers taking industrial action. Reza Shahabi, a member of the board of directors of the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company who was imprisoned June 12, 2010, went on dry hunger strike on December 4 to protest his incarceration and the refusal of authorities to release him despite his family depositing 60 million toman bail (about US\$57,000).

Israeli nurses on partial strike

Nurses began partial strike action January 19, after the treasury failed to meet their demands on reducing the overload of patient intake and limiting the capacity of internal wards.

Following through with threats made earlier this month, nurses have decided not to admit new patients to general hospitals that are over 100 percent capacity.

This will include 90 internal and paediatric wards in government hospitals and general health maintenance organizations. The paediatric wards at Schneider Hospital, Ichilov Hospital and Shiva Hospital will accept patients as usual.

Ilana Cohen, chair of the nurses' union, informed health services last week that nurses would be "forced to close the gates of the wards any time the permitted number of beds is exceeded. The responsibility for

these patients falls on the shoulders of the hospital administration, the treasury and the Health Ministry.”

A long-term agreement for the addition of 950 hospital beds over the next six years, although agreed by the treasury, has yet to be finalized.

UN conference cancelled due to Israeli Foreign Ministry strike

The Israeli Foreign Ministry announced it was cancelling a conference of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), scheduled for March, due to the Foreign Ministry employees’ strike.

The UNECE, with 56 countries, mostly in Europe, is one of the UN’s five regional economic commissions, with its major aim to promote pan-European economic integration.

The planned meeting in Israel was to have been addressed by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Invitations to the gathering were sent out two months ago, and delegates from some 50 countries were scheduled to attend.

The Foreign Ministry’s diplomatic workers have been engaged in a dispute for almost a year, in an attempt to equalize their salaries with those of Defense Ministry and Mossad employees. According to the workers’ committee, their salaries are nearly 50 percent less than those paid in the Defense Ministry, and less than 80 percent of what is earned by the intelligence agency.

As a result of ministry workers’ actions, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev had to recently cancel a scheduled visit to Israel. He went ahead with his previously planned trip to the Palestinian Authority and Jordan. The Foreign Ministry employees’ strike may also cancel a planned visit to South Africa by opposition Kadima leader, Tzipi Livni.

Protest over dismissals of Turkish airport workers

A thousand-strong protest took place in Turkey earlier this month to demand the reinstatement of 351 dismissed airport workers.

Workers at Istanbul Sabiha Gökçen (ISG), which operates the city’s second airport, marched to Taksim Square in Istanbul January 8. The employees were joined by road transport workers, postal workers, and retired employees.

The demonstrators wielded banners bearing slogans such as, “We want our jobs back” and “Immediate reinstatement of dismissed workers”. They chanted, “Long live working class solidarity.”

After the protest, around 100 workers blocked the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge over the Bosphorus. Police attacks against the protesters and subsequently detentions were reported. They were all released on the following day.

Nigerian maritime workers strike

Workers in the Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria (MWUN), working for the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), brought Shell’s off-shore support services to a standstill across the country when they began strike action on Monday.

According to MWUN leader, Anthony Emmanuel Nted, SPDC has not

paid debts owed to Texton/Royal Maritime Services that employs the dockers who service SPDC facilities. The debt is owed from 2007 and has resulted in financial hardship for the dockers employed by Texton.

Nigeria: Striking Rivers State lecturers continue long-running strike

Lecturers belonging to the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) at the Rivers State University of Science and Technology vowed to continue their long-running strike. They are demanding the state government implement an agreement on their terms and conditions signed with the federal government in 2009.

The ASUU chairman, Dr. Ugochukwu Ake, called on the state government to enter into negotiations with the union. The state governor, Chibuike Amaechi, has upped the stakes by calling on the lecturers to return to work within the next two weeks or consider themselves sacked.

Zimbabwean civil servants serve notice of strike action

Last weekend unions representing over 200,000 teachers and civil servants gave a week’s notice of strike action, following the breakdown of their negotiations with the government over a basic minimum wage of around US\$500 a month. This is considered the poverty datum line in Zimbabwe, the amount needed by an average family to adequately provide its minimum living requirements.

The unions had turned down a 24 percent pay increase. Tendai Chikowore, the chairperson of the group of unions negotiating with the government, described the offer as “an insult”. It would mean a lowest ranked teacher would get a salary of around US\$240 a month, while the lowest paid civil servant would only receive US\$160 a month.



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