

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

4 February 2011

Tens of thousands march in Italy against new Fiat work contracts

Tens of thousands of workers marched in demonstrations across Italy on January 28 to protest new work rules at two Fiat plants.

Around 10,000 workers gathered in the square facing Milan's Cathedral. Many of the protestors came from other sectors of industry that have been hit by the economic crisis which has idled many Italian factories.

After 18 years, in 2006 Davide Intacchi lost his factory job making home appliances near Milan. "Italy is lacking an industrial plan to protect the workforce," he observed.

Protests were also held at around 20 more sites across the country, including Rome, where workers in the CGIL union called for a general strike. The new union secretary general, Susanna Camusso, has not officially backed the strike and was booed at during a pre-strike protest in Bologna.

Protests followed the decision by Turin's Mirafiori plant to approve a work contract sought by Fiat CEO Sergio Marchionne, granted in return for further investment. The Mirafiori plant has been at the centre of Fiat production for over 70 years. Marchionne had threatened to close the factory and take production to the United States or Canada, if workers voted against the deal.

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi said ahead of the vote on the deal that Italian companies "would have good reason" to leave Italy if the proposal was rejected.

Public transport workers on strike in Athens over cuts

Transportation workers took strike action February 1 against planned public sector reforms and proposals to restructure state-run transport companies.

Bus and trolley bus workers held a two-day strike, while staff on the metro, used by 620,000 passengers daily, walked out in defiance of a court order to keep services running.

Workers from the electric railway service, which runs from the port city of Piraeus to the northern Athens suburb of Kifisia, called a 24-hour strike.

Around 600 workers marched through Athens shouting, "Hands off public transport."

The actions led to traffic jams in the capital's streets, as commuters traveled to work by car or taxi.

The walkouts came as new ticket increases kicked in, raising the cost of the main fare for all public transport from €1 to €1.40. The new pricing policy is part of a planned restructuring of loss-making public transport companies that will include pay cuts and involuntary staff transfers. These

changes are expected to be approved by parliament this month.

A series of strikes in protest over the issue have been held since December. There are plans for further walkouts later this week.

Austerity measures are being imposed on all sections of workers as a result of the government's acceptance of a €110 billion (\$151 billion) package of rescue loans from the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which will extend through mid-2013. The EU and IMF have a team of inspectors in Athens this week to monitor progress in implementing cuts.

Striking doctors occupy Greek Health Ministry

Hospital doctors called a 24-hour strike on February 2, as a number of their colleagues took over a conference room at the Health Ministry to stage a sit-in over government plans to slash spending in the state health sector.

Around 40 doctors who work for the IKA social security fund forced their way into the ministry. The medics refused to leave until they spoke to Health Minister Andreas Loverdos about the health reform bill his ministry is preparing.

The standoff at the ministry came a day after scuffles outside the building. Varvara Anemodoura, the head of the Piraeus doctors' association, was hurt as police tried to prevent medical staff from forcing their way in.

French pilots, flight attendants threaten strike over retirement benefits

French pilots and flight attendants are threatening to strike over retirement benefits in the run-up to school holidays.

UNAC, the main union for commercial flight personnel, told its members February 1 that it was giving notice for an imminent strike. The notice was to be sent to the prime minister's office and the transport ministry.

The airline pilots union SNPL Alpa has called for strike action from March 4 to March 7, a school vacation weekend.

Tens of thousands protest against austerity measures in Cyprus

Tens of thousands (estimates vary between 10,000 and 30,000) of

Turkish Cypriots in the north of divided Cyprus took part in industrial action on January 28. The protests were directed against official economic policies, which include bowing to pressure from Turkey to enact steep entry-level wage cuts for public sector jobs.

Protesters from around 40 organisations rallied in north Nicosia, voicing opposition to policies they say are driving young people off the island in search of jobs.

Tu&:rul Atakan, an 18 year-old student, said, “The economy is bad and everyone is getting angry. It’s getting worse and worse.”

Cagatay Karaer, a 42 year-old civil servant told the *Cyprus Mail*, “This package will lead to mass emigration over the next ten to 15 years.”

Some protestors expressed the position that a solution to the division of the island was the only way out of the economic crisis.

Dubbed the “destruction package”, the austerity measures will cut civil service salaries by up to 40 percent. They presage the sell-off of a number of “state-owned” corporations such as the electricity and telecommunications providers, along with the north’s largest university, the Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU).

The Turkish Cypriot government of the right-wing National Unity Party (UBP) employs around one in eight people in the north. Wage cuts would have a knock-on effect on the entire economy.

Turkey, which only recognizes the north and maintains 35,000 troops there, props up the Turkish Cypriot economy with tens of millions of Turkish lira in annual aid. But per capita income in the north fell from a peak of \$15,000 per annum in 2007 to \$13,500 in 2010.

Irish student nurses threaten pay strikes

Thousands of student nurses and midwives are planning a campaign of strike action beginning February 9 to protest government cuts to their pay.

The government, facing an election on February 25, intends to ultimately eliminate payments made to student nurses and midwives during their mandatory 36-week placement in hospitals. Student nurses receive 80 percent of a full salary during their nine-month internships on hospital wards, which forms part of their four-year degree study programme.

The February 9 strike by around 6,000 student nurses and midwives-in-training in 13 hospitals across the country is to be followed by a march and rally in Dublin on February 16.

Protest over minimum wage cut in Ireland

A protest over the cutting of the national minimum wage by €1 per hour was staged outside the gates of the Dáil on February 1.

Anne Costello of the Community Platform said cutting the minimum wage to €7.65 will wipe an additional €40 a week off the household budgets of tens of thousands of already struggling working families across the country.

The latest data from the Central Statistics Office shows that about 47,000 workers, or 3.1 percent of the employed labour force, are paid at or below the current adult experienced-worker rate of €8.65. However, some union estimates point to around 350,000 low-paid workers in Ireland.

Welsh train cleaners to strike over wages and pensions

Train cleaning crews, employed by the Mitie company and servicing First Great Western trains out of depots at Cardiff and Swansea, will strike for 24 hours on February 4.

The strike follows a 100 percent vote for action in a dispute over pensions, payment of wages and failure to make an offer on pay for 2010. Mitie recently announced a 12 percent increase in profits.

Sheffield journalists to strike over jobs

Journalists at the *Sheffield Star* are preparing to take industrial action over management’s plans to cut jobs at the Johnston Press editorial hub in the city. National Union of Journalists (NUJ) members decided January 31 to act on their strike ballot, unless management guarantees there will be no compulsory redundancies.

The union is also demanding that freelance jobs be converted into staff posts where these become available through reorganisation. They are insisting on a response from Johnston Press to their demand for a pay increase.

Journalists voted for strike action over plans to dismantle the Sheffield editorial hub of the regional chain, a project the company forced through less than a year ago despite workforce resistance.

Tehranian workers continue protests over back pay

Workers in Tehran continued to stage protests last week against non-payment of wages. The most recent protest, reported by the ILNA agency, was on January 24. Employees of the Pars Metal Company gathered in front of the Iranian parliament.

The minimum wage for workers in Iran is pegged at 303,000 tomans (around \$290) a month. Several unions, including the Tehran and Suburban Bus Drivers’ Union, argue that given the poverty line in Iran, the monthly salary should be at least 1 million tomans (around \$960).

Israeli power workers threaten strike over pension agreement

Employees at the Israel Electric Corporation (IEC) announced January 31 that they will hold a strike at the company unless a solution is found to the “legal problem” that is preventing the signing of a new pension agreement.

Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein opposes the agreement, saying that the Histadrut (General Federation of Unions in Israel) and IEC workers committee have no authority to sign a pension agreement on behalf of IEC’s pensioners.

The Ministry of Finance wants the agreement because it is a key condition of the IEC workers committee for renewing negotiations on reforming the company.

Pensioners’ organisations, which were not a party in the negotiations on the pension agreement, oppose it because it cuts the linkage between pensions and wages of current IEC employees.

Nigerian teachers in strike action

Teachers in primary schools in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) are taking strike action over wage arrears and other issues. Pupils were due to return to school this week after an extended school holiday.

Speaking to the press, the chairman of the FCT wing of the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT), Hassan Jibir, said the strike will continue until the FCT education secretariat pays the teachers their 40 percent arrears and addresses other outstanding issues relating to promotion and other benefits.

On December 10 of last year the NUT executive had given the FCT Education Board three weeks notice of action if the matter was not resolved. The NUT met with the FCT three weeks ago, but talks ended in deadlock and the strike commenced following the end of the school holidays.

Doctors in Nigerian state of Imo begin strike action

The Imo state branch of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) instructed all doctors employed by the state government to begin indefinite strike action February 1.

The NMA also instructed doctors working in federal facilities within Imo to come out in solidarity action.

The action has been taken to pressure the Imo state government to implement the federally agreed Consolidated Medical Salary Structure, CONMESS.

Doctors action continues in the Nigerian states of Osun and Enugu

Members of the Osun State Association of Medical and Dental Officers (OSAMDO) are continuing their three-week strike to get the state government to implement the CONMESS agreement.

The current state governor is blaming the dispute on the previous administration and has appealed to the doctors to return to work.

OSAMDO spokesmen said the state government had the ability to fund the salary scale agreement and called for it to be implemented in line with southwestern states in Nigeria.

Doctors belonging to the Association of Resident Doctors (ARD) at Enugu State University of Science and Technology Teaching Hospital in Parklane have been on strike since December 1 of last year, demanding the implementation of the CONMESS agreement.

According to the Enugu commissioner for Information and Culture, the National Industrial court granted an order January 21 instructing the doctors to return to work. ARD spokesmen claim they have not received such an order, but would return to work if ordered to do so by a court with the "right jurisdiction."



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