

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

18 February 2011

Europe

Athens transit workers in 24-hour strike

Transit workers in the Greek capital, Athens, held a 24-hour strike February 15 to protest a bill before parliament to restructure state-run transport companies. Thousands of transit workers gathered in front of the parliament building to oppose the bill, which they believe would lead to privatizations.

The halting of the Athens metro—used by 620,000 passengers daily—along with city buses, trams and trolley buses caused major disruption. Workers on the electric railway service, which runs from the port city of Piraeus to the northern Athens suburb of Kifisia, also joined the action.

The parliamentary bill includes mergers of transit agencies, increased monitoring on spending and the involuntary transfer of transit employees. The bill proposals form part of cuts to spending at state-run companies to meet the terms of a €110 billion (\$148 billion) bailout from the European Union and International Monetary Fund.

Transit workers have held a series of strikes and work stoppages since December.

Strike ballot over pay freeze for UK postal staff

Around 4,000 Post Office counter staff at branches across the UK are to be balloted for industrial action over pay and job security. The Post Office has refused to consider a pay rise or any guarantee of no more branch closures.

Voting among staff at the 373 branches will begin February 18, with the ballot closing March 4.

Post Office Ltd (POL) experienced increased profits of £72 million last year, and awarded a pay rise to managers as well as increasing directors' remuneration by 21 percent (worth £3.9 million in 2009-10).

UK head teachers threaten strike over changes to pension scheme

Head teachers have served notice that they are prepared to take industrial action if government ministers approve sweeping changes to public sector pensions.

A survey by the National Association of Head Teachers found 64

percent of the 3,200 head teachers who responded backed some sort of industrial action to retain their pension scheme, while 89 percent opposed moves to end final salary benefits and switch to career average payouts.

Almost two thirds of head teachers are over 50, with many close to qualifying for retirement. Plans to end their final-salary pension scheme and replace it with a career average alternative would result in lower annual payouts for the majority of senior teachers.

The public sector pension reforms are to be outlined in a report by Lord Hutton early next month. The coalition government says it wants to find £2.8 billion in savings over the next three years from public sector pensions.

Last year head teachers took industrial action to signal their opposition to key stage 2 SATs tests. The coalition launched a review into the tests shortly after coming to power.

UK disabled workers in strike ballot over redundancies

Disabled workers employed by Remploy—a government owned company that provides employment and placements for disabled workers—are to conduct a national industrial action ballot over redundancies in the 54 sheltered workshops across Britain. Members of the GMB union at Remploy are said to have already voted in a consultative ballot by a majority of 5 to 1 to take strike action. The ballot will take place amongst GMB trade union members at 57 Remploy factories across the country.

Remploy last month told GMB that proposals for voluntary redundancy were being rolled out across the company from January 31 (just seven days after the legal consultation period of 90 days commenced on January 24). Remploy proceeded to inform more than 3,400 employees by letter on January 26 that they should seek to volunteer for redundancy.

Following the closure of 29 Remploy factories in 2008, around 85 percent who were made redundant are still unemployed.

Student nurses protest through Dublin over pay cuts

About 3,000 student nurses and their supporters marched through Dublin in Ireland February 16 in protest at proposed pay cuts.

Student nurses complete a 36-week work placement in the fourth year of their degree, during which time they are paid 80 percent of the bottom of the staff nurse scale. The Department of Health plans to phase out those payments by 2015, meaning that students will work full-time for nine months for free while replacing paid employees.

Last week around 4,000 nurses protested around the country.

Contract cleaners strike at Port Talbot steelworks, Wales

Seventy contract cleaners at Tata Steels' Port Talbot plant—one of Wales' biggest steelworks—mounted a two-day strike beginning February 14 to demand an improved pay offer from contractor OCS.

The Community union said most of the workers at the site earned the minimum wage. The union said the dispute has been inflamed by a company decision to draft in staff not normally employed at Port Talbot in an attempt to break the strike.

Bosnian rail workers strike for unpaid wages

Railway workers across Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) went on strike February 7 after no agreement over wages could be reached by trade union and government representatives.

According to Zlatko Marin, president of the strike committee, railway workers are demanding the payment of back wages amounting to approximately €11 million. Despite austerity measures and restructuring, railway officials said they will not be able to meet more than 70 percent of current wage claims.

Serbian teachers, health workers in fresh strikes

Teachers and health care workers in Serbia announced new strikes last week as some returned to work. The striking teachers are demanding a wage increase of up to 20 percent by the end of the year.

Estonian power workers demand wage increase

Workers at the national power company Eesti Energia's two power plants in the northeastern town of Narva are demanding a 25 percent wage rise and are prepared to go on strike if the claim is not met by April 1.

Wages at the national power company have not increased since 2008. According to the unions, the average monthly pay at the Narva plants is currently just above €1,000.

Anger was ignited by a statement published in *Postimees* by Markus Kaasik, Eesti Energia's chief of finances, which indicated that despite increased profits the company had no intention of raising workers' wages.

The other union, representing the workers of the neighbouring Balti Power Plant in Narva, has withheld its support for the 25 percent demand. Vladislav Ponjatovski, chairman of the Balti plant's union, said in his opinion a 10 percent wage increase was sufficient.

Strike threatens Icelandic fishing industry

A strike amongst the Iceland's fishmeal workers looms, as talks over pay and conditions ended without agreement earlier this week.

Plants in the east of the country and around the Westmann Islands will be directly affected, but any industrial action will have a deep impact on the important national fishing industry. A protracted strike could also draw in neighbouring countries, including Scotland.

The dispute over pay and conditions has been simmering for several weeks. Iceland's Industrial Court last week declared the strike illegal over a technicality.

The strike has been called in the middle of the busy capelin (smelt) processing season. Capelin is a significant component of the already battered Icelandic economy, generating up to £60 million a year. It is used for fishmeal, oil industry products, salmon feed and for human consumption.

Icelandic newspapers are reporting that trawler vessel owners could be planning to take their catches to neighbouring countries like Norway and the Faroe Islands, where there are capelin processing facilities, and to Scotland which has fish meal plants.

Middle East

Oil workers in Iraq's Kirkuk threaten strike over work conditions

Around 300 workers at Iraq's state-owned North Oil Company (NOC) in Kirkuk warned February 12 that they would go on strike if their work conditions did not improve, threatening the country's vital oil production.

The company employs 15,000 people, including 3,700 day workers, who are expected to join a strike.

"We are pleased with the results of events in Tunisia and Egypt," said Farhad Khaled Jabbar, one of the protesters.

"They (the government) should pay attention and respond to our demands, otherwise we will stop work and it is we who produce the wealth of this country, which ends up in the pockets of officials and MPs," he said.

Last year, Kirkuk exported 150 million barrels of oil, bringing in \$11.5 billion. Production from Kirkuk is exported through a pipeline linked to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan.

If the threatened strike goes ahead, it will be the first such action since the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Africa

Zimbabwean miners strike

Around 60 miners belonging to the National Union of Mines Quarry Workers at the West Nicholson mine in Gwanda, Zimbabwe went on strike last week. Their demands included improved wages and working conditions.

Their main grievance was over the transfer of some workers who pushed wheelbarrows underground to work on the cyanide settling tanks. The work done by them was transferred to the blasters, who see it as a downgrading of their status.

The workers also accuse the employer of illegally deducting taxes. None of the workers at the mine earn more than \$175 a month, which is the lower limit of taxable income.

Rwandan textile workers strike

More than 500 workers at the Utexrwa textile company in Kigali, Rwanda went on strike February 14. The workers said there was no way of raising their grievances, especially since the appointment of a new factory manager three months ago. Their other grievances include low pay, the minimum salary in Rwf 15,800 (US\$27) a month, and poor working conditions.

One worker explained, “Anyone who tries to raise their voice here is dismissed”. Five workers who went to the management with their grievances were summarily dismissed.

One elderly woman worker added, “We are paid very little and the conditions in which we work are hazardous to our health.”

Workers are no longer given the milk they used to receive, which helped to counteract the effects of the chemicals they use in production.

South Africa Metrobus workers strike ongoing

A strike that began last week by bus workers for Metrobus in Johannesburg is continuing. The workers, who belong to the South African Municipal Workers Union, are striking over changes in shift patterns.

Talks on Monday between management and the unions ended in deadlock. No further talks have been scheduled.

South African truck drivers strike goes ahead

A strike by truck drivers, members of the SA Transport and Allied Workers’ Union (SATAWU), began on Monday. The truck workers are seeking a 20 percent pay increase over two years. The employers, represented by the Road Freight Employers’ Association (RFEA), have offered 15 percent. Around 65,000 truck drivers are involved in the dispute.

Talks between the union and the RFEA have continued during the dispute. The strike is already having an impact at filling stations that are not supplied directly by oil company tankers, but rely on third party transport supplied by RFEA tankers.

Nigerian nurses in sympathy strike with doctors

Doctors working in Lagos state, Nigeria began their latest round of strike action on February 4, in an attempt to get the state to impose the Consolidated Medical Salary Scale (CONMESS) previously agreed by the federal government.

Until Tuesday of this week, nurses working in the health facilities had been providing a skeletal service to patients. They have now begun sympathy strike action in support of the doctors’ demands.

A matron at Surulere General Hospital, Mrs. Funke Omiwale, explained, “We have decided to join the strike and will not work until their demands are met.”

Nigeria’s Union bank workers strike

Following the Nigeria Labour Congress-organised picket of branches of the Union Bank across Nigeria, bank workers at Union Bank have begun strike action. This is the latest round of industrial action in an ongoing dispute. Picketing was carried out by the bank workers and other unions affiliated to the NLC.

Workers at the Union Bank are represented by the Union Bank Association of Senior Staff (UBASS) and the Association of Senior Staff of Banks, Insurance and Financial Institutions (ASSBIFI).

The dispute was sparked following the appointment of Mrs. Funke Osibodu as general managing director at Union Bank. She had issued a letter de-recognising the unions.

In addition 300 workers have been sacked, others have been summarily transferred to branches in different parts of the country and many workers have had their status reduced from permanent staff to contract workers.

The unions are demanding the reinstatement of sacked workers, restoration of previous terms and conditions and the sacking of Osibodu, who had previously stopped union activity at Ecobank.



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