Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

4 March 2011

Auto products workers at Total strike

Workers at car cleaning products maker Total Lescot (30 km east of Paris), a subsidiary of the French-owned oil corporation, went on strike February 24 in protest at plans to sell the unit.

Refinery workers at Total were involved in a month-long strike in October over the government's pension reforms. The action severely disrupted energy supply across France.

A spokeswoman at Total confirmed the group was in discussions with potential buyers for Lescot, which employs 71 staff. Total has said it aims to reduce its exposure to the European refinery industry due to weak demand and poor margins. The corporation made a profit of €10 billion in 2010.

German train drivers in work stoppages over pay and call for further strikes

German train drivers were involved a two-hour work stoppage February 22 and a three-hour stoppage February 25. They are calling for further strikes in support of pay claims.

The workers want pay scales for drivers at six small rail firms brought into line with those at national operator Deutsche Bahn, as well as a higher wage offer from the state-owned national operator.

The dispute directly concerns up to 26,000 train drivers in the Rhine-Main region around Frankfurt and in Stuttgart, Dresden and Berlin.

The recent work stoppage followed seven months of negotiations over the pay claims.

Reuters reported February 22, "The bulk of Germany's workforce has for two years accepted modest pay rises due to the financial crisis, but increasing numbers are now seeking to share in Germany's faster-than-expected economic recovery, leading some economists to fear a wage-price spiral."

German public sector workers start one-day strikes

German public sector workers began a series of one-day strikes February 28 to demand a 3 percent pay increase, an additional €50 per month and a guarantee of employment for apprentices.

The Verdi union, containing almost 600,000 workers, said around 2,500 stayed away from work in the state of Saarland and 2,800 in Hesse, affecting schools, universities, ministries and local government. Strikes took place in the states of Hesse and Saarland March 1, and spread the following day to North Rhine-Westphalia and Schleswig-Holstein.

Workers at university clinics, courts, ministries and municipal administrative offices, along with street maintenance crews and firefighters, walked off the job in North Rhine-Westphalia on March 2. In the northern state of Schleswig-Holstein, the Education and Science Workers' Union (GEW) called a teachers' strike at schools in Neumünster, Itzehoe, Flensburg and Pinneberg.

Additional strikes have been planned for the states of Hamburg, Baden-Württemberg and Bayern, Lower Saxony and Bremen. A second round of pay talks was adjourned February 25, after employers declined to present a pay offer and asked the union to reduce its demands.

Annual inflation in Germany is at its highest since 2008, and economic analysts say they expect it to rise further in coming months.

Irish distribution centre workers strike over compulsory redundancies

A notice of industrial action has been served on Pullman Fleet Services at its plant in Ballymun, Dublin, in a dispute over compulsory redundancies.

The company is only offering statutory redundancy plus €1,000 to each of the 23 workers involved, a payment of between €5,000 and €8,000.

The jobs cuts result from the loss of a contract from retail giant Tesco.

Irish bank faces all-out strike

A ballot for industrial action is to be taken amongst 1,800 staff employed at Permanent TSB, after the bank failed to guarantee their jobs following the recent acquisition of Irish Nationwide.

Irish Nationwide is said to have a deposit book worth around €3.6 billion. The 240 staff formerly employed by the bank are to be transferred to Permanent TSB. An auction of the state-owned bank's deposit books was held after Finance Minister Brian Lenihan asked the courts for permission to sell them.

Solidarity protest with Irish *Tribune* workers

More than 100 people took part in a solidarity protest February 24 outside the offices of the *Sunday Tribune* in Dublin city centre, as staff at

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the newspaper gathered to collect their final pay cheques.

The protestors included many former *Tribune* staff and those involved in print and electronic media organisations across the city.

The 43 workers employed at the *Sunday Tribune* also held an "open picket" at the Irish headquarters of Independent News & Media (INM), the majority shareholder in the paper, asking it to provide *ex gratia* redundancy payments.

The paper went into receivership earlier this month after INM decided to withdraw its funding from the paper.

Two-day strike by UK train drivers

Two days of strike action by drivers at Arriva Trains Wales in a pay dispute began February 28.

Drivers have rejected a management offer of a 12 percent rise over two years. Arriva Trains runs services throughout Wales and into parts of England.

Strike ballot over pensions at Ford UK

The auto giant Ford was notified February 24 that around 11,000 workers are to be balloted for industrial action, in response to the company attack on its current and ex-employees' pensions.

In January, Ford announced that it intended to use the consumer price index (CPI) to calculate its inflation-linked increases to pension scheme payments, rather than the normally higher retail price index (RPI).

The changed calculation will mean a significant financial loss for workers, affecting those currently employed and a further 30,000 ex-Ford workers who draw a company pension.

CPI is less than RPI in most years because it excludes housing and council tax costs. According to the UNITE union web site, if pensions paid today had been linked to CPI instead of RPI for the last 20 years, they would now be 14 percent lower.

The strike ballot at Ford would include plants at Bridgend, Halewood, Daventry and Dunton, as well as the two engine plants at Dagenham. Ford plants in Dagenham and Bridgend manufacture two thirds of the engines Ford builds worldwide. The plants also build engines for Jaguar, Land Rover and Volvo.

The last national strike at Ford took place in the 1970s.

UK University lecturers vote for strikes over jobs, pay, pensions

University lecturers across Britain have voted in favour of taking action to defend their jobs, pay and pensions.

The ballot held by the University and Colleges Union (UCU) resulted in a 52.6 percent vote in favour of strikes on jobs and pay. Nearly 74 percent backed action short of strikes.

More than 64 percent backed strikes to defend their present pension scheme, and over 82 percent backed action short of a strike.

Migrant workers on hunger strike over Greek visas are hospitalised

Around 50 migrant workers were admitted to hospital March 1, almost five weeks after going on hunger strike in Athens and Thessaloniki.

More than 280 migrants began the hunger strike in late January, calling on the Greek government to grant them residence permits.

Most of the migrant workers were admitted with acute dehydration, and some were being treated for acute kidney failure and heart palpitations, Greek media said. An immigrant support network said many of the strikers, most of them from North Africa, had stopped taking water. The BBC reported, "As supporters gathered outside the Greek parliament in Athens, there were reports of minor scuffles with police." Stratis Plomaritis, a doctor in the second city of Thessaloniki, told the ANA news agency, "There is no room for waiting or negotiation, tomorrow one of them could be dead."

Many of the hunger strikers have lived and worked on the Greek island of Crete for several years. At least 350,000 migrant workers in Greece are without residence permits, which are required for access to social insurance payments. Unemployment amongst migrant workers has risen along with the national jobless rate, which is officially almost 14 percent, as a result of the economic crisis and the PASOK government's severe austerity.

Greece has become the busiest gateway for migrants attempting to enter the EU. According to government figures, 128,000 migrants arrived in Greece illegally in 2010—officially around 90 percent of the total EU number. The Greek government has refused to legalise the migrant workers.

Spanish airport workers to strike against privatisation

Industrial action has been threatened by Spain's airport workers over plans to partly privatise the civil aviation agency AENA, resulting in less pay and worsening working conditions.

The threatened strike would take place April 22-25, closing down airports during the busy Easter vacation. But the action could be extended to May 22, when the country holds regional elections.

A march of 2,500 of AENA's more than 12,000 employees, including baggage handlers and firefighters, took place February 26 in Madrid, to the city's central Puerta del Sol square.

The government last week incorporated a new holding company, under which private investors can buy up to 49 percent of AENA's shares.

Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE) government halted an air traffic control strike in December by imposing an emergency decree that threatened employees with prison and placed control towers under military supervision.

Israeli social workers launch open-ended strike

An announcement was made March 1 that around 10,000 social workers planned to begin an open-ended strike, calling for a 25 percent wage increase.

The social workers have been in negotiations with the Finance Ministry's wage director for the past six months. They are demanding a wage increase, in light of the fact that they have not received a raise in 17 years.

The erosion of social workers' salaries has led to a situation in which a third of them currently receive state income supplements to bring them up to the minimum wage.

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Margarita Slov, who has been employed in social work for more than 17 years, told the *Jerusalem Post*, "We are very upset that this could not be resolved without a strike…. How can we sit before the weaker segments of the population, hear their woes and cries for help, if we ourselves feel there is no justice in society and that the work we do is not appreciated enough?"

Swaziland textile workers strike

Workers, mainly women, at Texray textiles went on strike for two days last week, in pursuit of a 10 percent pay increase. The workers returned to work after the company was granted a court ruling deeming the strike illegal. Although represented by the Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied Workers Union (SMAWU), the union only became involved after the strike at the behest of management, to "calm them down".

The textile workers, like all Swazi workers, are seeing a steep increase in the price of basic commodities.

Swaziland: Workers face dismissal

Workers at Union Industrial Washing face dismissal after being on strike two days last week. The workers took the action in pursuit of a 5 percent pay increase, rejecting the company's offer of 3 percent. Fifteen of the workers who took part in the action have been suspended and face the sack. Workers at the factory delayed starting work Monday for two hours, demanding the suspended workers be reinstated.

Zimbabwe farm workers allege abuse

Around 700 farm workers employed at a Marondera farm are alleging abuse, after lobbying for pay increases and seeking union involvement. The farm is owned by Francois Smit, who employs Cleopas Kundiona to provide security services at the farm. Farm workers allege Kundiona has issued death threats against union activists.

The workers currently earn US$55 a month, which is the national employment council approved wage for workers employed in general agriculture. The workers say they should be paid the higher agro wage of US$80 per month, as the farm's activities include piggery, honey processing, etc., which means the farm should be reclassified.

Workers dismissed from the farm allege that Zanu PF youth activists come at night and take them away from the farm, dumping them some distance away. One man, Guidance Chipere, says he was taken away along with his family and possessions and dumped at the roadside in the rain. His one-year-old daughter died a few days later from the effects of exposure to the rain.

Miners' strike in Zimbabwe

Workers in the National Union of Mining Quarry Iron and Steel Workers of Zimbabwe, working at West Nicholson Mine, went on strike this week. Amongst their grievances are arrears of pay dating back to 2009, poor sanitary conditions and no proper job-grading scheme to reflect skill and experience.

Two Nigerian transport workers die in battle with police

Two members of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) were shot dead after transport workers clashed with police in Olomi, in Oyo state.

A team of police attempted to attack the union secretariat office in Olomi. The workers threw up a bonfire and blockades of vehicles to defend the union building. As a result, the 300 police, with armoured personnel carriers and police vans, were forced to withdraw.

The action was taken at the instigation of the state governor and in breach of a court order. The workers were defending the union chairman, Alhaji Lateef Akinsola. Workers claimed that amongst the forces shooting at them was the leader of the union, dressed in police uniform and wearing a bulletproof jacket.

Doctors vote to continue strike in Lagos, Nigeria

Doctors in Lagos voted overwhelmingly on Monday to continue their three-week strike. They are demanding that the state government implement the Consolidated Medical Salary Scale (CONMESS) that was agreed between the federal government and the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA).

They had suspended their previous strike in January, but resumed it in February after the state's continual refusal to implement the agreement.

Nigeria: Bauchi state doctors strike

Doctors belonging to the Bauchi state chapter of the Nigerian Medical Association went on strike this week, protesting the detention of one of their members, Dr. Adamu Sambo. He was arrested by State Security Service (SSS) forces in Plateau state.

The doctors gave a 12-hour ultimatum, stating that his detention was illegal. The SSS in Plateau state have since confirmed Adamu Sambo's arrest and where he is being held, but have not said why he has been detained.

Federal doctors' sympathy strike in support of Enugu state doctors, Nigeria

Doctors employed at the federal-run facilities, the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, the National Orthopaedic Hospital and the Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital in Enugu state, went on strike Monday.

The doctors began the one-week strike in sympathy with their colleagues employed in Enugu state facilities, on strike since December 2010.

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Nigerian judicial workers resume strike Following their congress, February 26, Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria members in the southeastern state of Anambra resumed their strike. They are demanding the implementation of the Consolidated Salary Scale for Judicial Workers previously agreed by the federal government.

South African municipal waste workers' strike continues[/subhead]

Workers in the South African Municipal Workers Union working for Ekurhuleni Municipality have been on strike since February 14. They began the strike following the dismissal of seven of their shop stewards.

The municipality has said it will bring in private contractors to remove solid waste, which has begun to build up as a result of the strike.

Namibian security staff strike

Security staff employed by Sitore Security Services, employed at Windhoek Central Hospital, went on strike Monday. They are striking over wage arrears for January and February. The Namibia Security Guard and Watchman's Union was due to have talks with management Tuesday.

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