

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

11 March 2011

## Portugal: Thousands to join demonstrations for jobs, against poor wages and work conditions

The *Portugal News* reported March 5 that “[t]ens of thousands of people have pledged to take part in public demonstrations on Saturday, March 12 against the lack of jobs, poor wages and unjust working conditions.”

More than 37,000 people responded to a national Facebook appeal for Portugal’s “Desperate Generation” to oppose unemployment and other attacks on working people.

The two main demonstrations are to take place along the Avenida da Liberdade and in the Praça Luís de Camões, as well as in Oporto’s Praça D. João I. Smaller demonstrations are expected to be staged throughout the country.

A mission statement on the “Protesto da Geração á Rasca” Facebook page reads, “We, the unemployed, the €500-earners and other poorly paid [employees], the slaves in disguise, the subcontracted, the temps, the fake self-employed, the intermittent workers...mothers, fathers and children of Portugal. We protest: For the right to employment, for the right to education, for the right to improved working conditions and an end to instability; for the recognition of qualifications, competence and experience, reflected in contracts and dignified salaries.”

Statistics on the fourth quarter of 2010, released last week by the National Statistics Institute (INE), show that the age group 15-to-24-year-olds has the largest number of jobless in Portugal—23 percent. Of these young adults, 27.5 percent have a university degree.

## Belgians protests over austerity measures

Protests took place across Belgium March 4 against austerity measures and wage caps.

Several main arteries into Brussels were blocked by demonstrators and factories closed across much of the country.

Among other measures, the protestors were opposing the capping of wage increases by the government to no more than 0.3 percent above inflation. Union leaders had initially backed the deal, but rank-and-file members came out in force against it.

## Bulgarian train drivers to strike over contracts

Train drivers are taking action March 10 and 11 at the state-owned Bulgarian Railroad Company (BDZ), following the failure of the two

railroad companies to fulfil the clauses of a labour contract. Meetings between management and the unions last week failed to prevent the strike.

The workers have been angered by a World Bank contract mandating the restructuring of BDZ that will result in the destruction of thousands of jobs. The planned job cuts at the railways are one of the conditions for obtaining from the international agency a 600 million leva loan aimed at overhauling the sector.

## French dockers block ferries in Marseille

The port of Marseille was blocked March 9 by dockworkers on strike since March 8 over a proposed decrease in the number of ship journeys between Nice and Corsica.

On the following day, dockers in Brégaillon port in Toulon-La Seyne-sur-Mer prevented the docking of two ships that had not been able to dock at Marseille. The workers positioned two trailers on the quay, preventing the ferries’ gates from opening. The two ships then went to another port in Toulon, where the dockworkers allowed only the passengers to disembark.

Dockers for the Société Nationale Corse Méditerranée, the company in charge of transport between Corsica and the mainland, have been on strike since January 31. Five SNCM boats have been stranded in Marseille and in Bastia in Corsica for the last five weeks.

## Germany: teachers, civil servants protest

On March 9, tens of thousands of teachers and civil servants protested in several states in the east of Germany, calling for better working conditions and fairer contracts for trainee teachers. Many schools across the eastern states of Germany shut mid-morning as teachers went on strike.

## 12,000 German Telekom workers strike over pay

Around 12,000 workers employed at Deutsche Telekom continued their warning strikes March 9, which have been prompted by a wage dispute.

The main areas affected by the strikes were in North Rhine Westphalia, Lower Saxony/Bremen, North Germany and Baden-Wuerttemberg.

Almost 90,000 workers have walked out since the start of the wage dispute.

### **Greek telecom workers strike separately in same dispute over jobs**

Around 100 striking workers at Cosmote, Greece's main mobile phone operator, held a demonstration March 3 outside the labour ministry in Athens against 120 planned layoffs.

The union at Cosmote launched a two-day strike March 3, while action by workers at parent company OTE telecom began March 4.

The OTE group posted a 90 percent fall in profits last year, with Cosmote also facing a contraction. The Greek government controls 20 percent of OTE, while Germany's Deutsche Telekom holds a 30 percent stake.

### **Scotland: Dundee University staff in one-day strike over jobs**

Staff at Dundee University staged a 24-hour strike March 8 over the threat of redundancies.

Dundee University and College Union (DUCU) said 195 people could be made redundant.

The university's governing body announced in October that almost 200 jobs could be cut in a bid to save £8 million a year.

### **UK: Fourth strike ballot by cabin crew in three-year-old dispute at BA**

Around 10,000 cabin crew at British Airways (BA) began a vote on industrial action on March 1, in a dispute over working conditions that is now in its third year.

Twenty-two days of strike action were held in 2010. Since spring 2010, BA has moved to sack 18 crew members and discipline 70 more for matters connected with the dispute.

Unite union General Secretary Len McCluskey has invited the airline's new chief executive, Keith Williams, to meet with him at any time.

### **Sixty-three UK universities to be hit with strikes over staff pensions**

Sixty-three UK universities serving 1.4 million students will be hit with strike action this month, unless a dispute over changes to staff pensions can be resolved.

Industrial action by university staff has been announced in Scotland for March 17, Wales for March 18, Northern Ireland for March 21 and England for March 22. A second day of strike action across the UK is to be held March 24.

Last week, University and Colleges Union (UCU) members of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension plan at 63 universities voted to strike and take action short of a strike. Overall, 64.55 percent of UCU members who voted supported a strike and 82.19 percent voted for action short of a strike.

Following the result, UCU General Secretary Sally Hunt wrote to the Employers Pension Forum (EPF) to request urgent talks through the arbitration service, ACAS, in its latest desperate effort to sabotage the first national strike action in universities for five years.

### **Welsh train drivers plan further strike over pay and conditions**

Train drivers at Arriva Trains Wales are to mount a 24-hour strike March 12, after the failure of talks to resolve a long-running dispute over pay and conditions.

The strike is scheduled on the day of the Wales versus Ireland Six Nations rugby game, threatening major transport disruption.

### **Ireland school secretaries to take action over pay cut**

School secretaries are to take industrial action over a 5 percent pay cut. The workers say the cut could push those on the minimum wage out of the workforce altogether.

Those involved are not paid directly by the Department of Education, and say it is unfair of the department to cut their pay while depriving them of public service benefits such as pensions.

The trade union Impact said the secretaries had voted in favour of a strike by a margin of 72 percent.

The pay cut follows a stipulation by the Department of Education and Skills to all schools and vocational education colleges to impose pay cuts on up to 17,000 low-paid staff, including school secretaries and cleaners.

### **Wage dispute at Hungarian tyre manufacturer**

The Budapest *Business Journal* reported March 3 that South Korean tyre maker Hankook may halt production in Hungary "after workers set up a strike committee over a wage dispute."

The more than 1,700 workers employed at the plant earn less because of tax changes introduced in January.

### **Iranian workers protest at chemical, tire plants**

Workers at two factories in Iran recently protested their employment conditions, reported RFE/RL's Radio Farda.

The protests drew in workers of the Alborz tire factory near Tehran and a major petrochemical plant in the northern city of Tabriz.

"A labor activist in Tehran who spoke on condition of anonymity told RFE/RL that several Alborz workers gathered in front of the factory on March 2 to protest unpaid wages."

Two days earlier, there was a protest at the plant when hundreds of workers, along with their families, gathered in front of the factory, according to the "opposition" website *Sahamnews*.

On February 26, according to the Iranian Free Labour Union, over 300 Alborz workers held a protest rally in front of the district office of Chahar Dang to demand immediate attention be paid to their situation.

The Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA) reported March 2 that around 1,800 contractors of the Tabriz petrochemical plant protested against management's decision not to renew their contracts.

Unofficial reports state that workers demanded an increase in their wages, as well as benefits such as health insurance.

### **Israel: Hundreds protest price increases**

On March 1, hundreds protested against the recent round of price increases in front of the Congress Center in Haifa, where a conference of the government trade office took place, *Haaretz* reported.

Some of the demonstrators tried to force their way into the Congress Centre, but police prevented them from doing so and arrested four.

The protesters wrote the slogan, "The Invisible Citizen" on an effigy of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and burned it.

### **Israeli social workers strike over pay and work conditions**

Around 10,000 social workers nationally went on strike beginning March 6, demanding higher pay and improved working conditions from the Ministry of Finance.

The strike includes all welfare offices, social workers at hospitals, psychiatric hospitals, healthcare organisations, the Ministry of Health, mental health institutions, the Ministry of Defence rehabilitation branch, juvenile and adult probation officers, and children's investigators. Social workers are also expected to close down family violence treatment centres and institutions that provide services to local authorities and schools.

The average gross monthly salary of a new social worker is NIS4,183, and a social worker with 15 years seniority earns NIS5,279 a month. The social workers are demanding a 30 percent pay increase and overtime when they are on standby after regular work hours.

Around 400 social workers and supporters demonstrated in Beersheva on the first day of action. Fifty demonstrators also protested outside the prime minister's office in Jerusalem, carrying signs reading, "We demand to work with dignity." On March 8, thousands of social workers and students converged on the plaza opposite the Finance Ministry in Jerusalem, calling on the Treasury to meet their demands.

Deputy Finance Minister Yitzhak Cohen offered the social workers differential increases to their salaries based on their income level. He said if the social workers agree to the proposal, the strike would end "within minutes", reported *Army Radio*.

A number of social workers said in response that they hoped the union declined the offer, saying that such a compromise does not meet their demands.

Negotiations between the social workers and the Treasury have been going on for more than six months, with recently appointed Minister of Welfare and Social Services Moshe Kahlon stepping in to negotiate with Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz on their behalf.

A study last January reported that more than 433,000 families, or one in every five households, received treatment from social welfare services in 2009, pointing to a dramatic increase over the past decade. The Social Workers Union estimated that the strike would affect roughly a quarter of the population.

### **Nigerian port workers strike**

Members of the Maritime Workers Union of Nigeria (MWUN) working at port facilities throughout the country held a one-day strike Tuesday. They were seeking a pay increase after their previous contract agreement with the Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA) ended in June last year.

Despite talks between the union and the NPA, no agreement was reached. Two weeks ago, the union gave an ultimatum of strike action.

Following further talks between the union and the NPA held on the day of the strike, in which the employers said they would address the issues raised by the union, the union instructed its members to return to work Wednesday March 9. The NPA has not committed to a pay increase.

### **Sudan teachers' strike**

Primary school teachers in the south Sudan state of Jonglei have been on strike since the last week of February. Teachers in the capital Bor came out first, followed by others throughout the state the next day.

The teachers are demanding payment of housing allowances they have not been getting. All government employees are supposed to receive the allowance, but the state government did not pay it, pleading lack of funds.

In response to the strike, the Jonglei state government has stopped paying the housing allowance to all government employees, but has said it will review the situation when the budget for 2011 is finalised.

### **Namibian uranium mine workers' strike**

Members of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia, working as construction workers for Basil Read Mining Namibia, went on strike at Rossing Uranium mine last week and picketed the entrance. The strikers' demands were for an increase in shifts from three to four and for payment of arrears for extra work done.

The employer Basil Read responded by going to the industrial court and obtaining an order preventing the workers from taking any form of industrial action at the Rossing mine site. In response, the workers moved their picket to Basil Read premises in Arandis.

A union spokesman said if the court order was nullified, the workers would return to work pending negotiations on their demands.

### **South African municipal workers' strike continues**

Around 100 members of the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) in Ekuhuleni gathered outside the municipal offices on

Monday demanding the reinstatement of seven dismissed shop stewards. The municipal workers have been on strike now for four weeks. Police were called in to disperse the demonstrating workers, and two were arrested.

### **South African Metrobus workers' strike continues**

The strike by SAMWU members working for Metrobus in Johannesburg is in its fourth week. It began over changes in shift patterns imposed on the Metrobus workers. Around 70 bus drivers are involved in the dispute. Talks between the unions and Metrobus continue, and the unions claim an agreement is imminent.

### **South African municipal worker dies in clash with police**

Around 900 municipal workers, members of SAMWU in the Tshwane district of Pretoria, were sacked last week after going on an "illegal" strike. SAMWU member Petros Msiza, 43, was killed after police clashed with refuse and bus workers outside the Church Street depot last Thursday.

SAMWU has called for a judicial inquiry into the police violence that resulted in Msiza's death. The call has been supported by the trade union federation COSATU.

### **Kenyan council workers' strike**

Council workers belonging to the Local Government Workers Union in the western city of Kisumu on Lake Victoria went on strike this week. Amongst the workers' demands are the payment of salary arrears and the reinstatement of 98 workers summarily dismissed. In addition, they are calling for council workers to be given their council houses, which the government plans to sell.

The council has declared the strike illegal and has threatened to use the law against the workers.



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