

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

25 March 2011

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

UK lecturers strike over pay and pension changes

Tens of thousands of lecturers from 63 universities across the UK (including a third of all of England's universities), as well as higher education colleges, took industrial action this week to protest against changes to pay and pension funds.

From next month, the retirement age for academics will be raised from 60 to 65 years and there will be an end to final salary pensions for new members.

The academics' pension scheme is private, but some qualify for public pensions.

The 24-hour action took place March 24. On March 21 lecturers also struck at Northern Ireland's two main universities, Queen's University and the University of Ulster, which cater for around 50,000 students.

This is the first UK-wide industrial action in universities for five years.

Among the universities affected by the strike in Scotland are Aberdeen, Glasgow and Stirling.

In England, lecturers from Oxford, Birmingham, Liverpool, Bradford and Essex universities are among those striking. The University and College Union (UCU) said some institutions were wrongly warning academics that they had to tell the heads of their faculties if they wanted to take part in the strikes.

An email sent to staff at London's City University, from the institution's director of human resources, stated that those that went on strike would have their pay deducted and would be breaching their contract.

At Sheffield Hallam University, students received emails telling them: "This is a national dispute and cannot be resolved locally" and "the University has good relations with local trade unions..."

Construction protest over redundancies at Hull fuel plant

Traffic in the East Hull area was brought to a halt this week for the second time running in the dispute over 400 redundancies at a BP fuel plant in Humberside.

Vivergo Fuels Ltd terminated a contract with Redhall Engineering Solutions Ltd (RESL) March 11 for the fabrication and installation of pipework for a new £200-million bioethanol plant on the BP Saltend site, near Hull.

Vivergo alleges that RESL had fallen significantly behind the agreed contractual delivery programme; asserting that mechanical and piping works should have been completed by February. RESL parent, Redhall Group, disputes some details of this and has added that around £14 million of costs on the contract were still unpaid.

Vivergo is currently assessing what will be required to complete the work on site, a potentially lengthy process. Redhall was awarded the contract for mechanical piping within the scope of work in February 2010 with 316 manual workers and 134 staff workers, added the GMB.

Other contractors are Deborah Services Ltd Scaffolding (DSL) with 63 manual workers, SEC Electrical (40 manual workers), Syntex Engineering Services (17 manual workers), FB Taylor (10 manual workers) and Mammoet Cranes (15 manual workers).

Redhall's contract had been valued at around £30 million. The company had anticipated trading profits in the current financial year for the Vivergo contract to be in the region of £1.7 million.

Citizen attention phone service strike in Spain

A strike amongst workers on the 012 citizen attention phone service in Madrid took place March 23. Staff say there have been "continuous irregularities" on the part of the company that has been granted the tender for the service, Grupo Norte.

The workforce is calling for 23 workers who were sacked in December, January and February to be reinstated.

Nurses and midwives in Ireland to ballot on strike over pay rates

Agency nurses and midwives are to be ballot on industrial action in a dispute over reductions in pay rates.

The dispute arose in moves by the Health Service Executive (HSE) to put in place a new system for securing staff provided by agencies, including nurses, non-consultant doctors and other health care personnel.

The HSE says the measures will generate up to €40 million in savings.

The *Irish Times* reported, March 23, "For the last week or so a number of nurses working for agencies have refused to make themselves available at the new rates, a move that has caused disruption to elective admissions in some hospitals."

Power plant workers in Estonia to take strike action

Staff at the Narva Power Plant are to take industrial action in demand for a 25 percent pay rise.

Workers have not received a raise in three years despite continual price increases over the same period.

The workers, mainly employees of one of Eesti Energia's two power plants in Narva, decided at their March 18 meeting to form a strike committee.

The current contract between Eesti Energia and the union ends March 31.

Nurses in Poland occupy parliament gallery

On March 17, a group of nurses occupied the gallery of the Polish Parliament (the Sejm) in Warsaw to protest the casualization of the profession, before beginning a sit-in protest.

The nurses are protesting a new draft law on medical services, adopted by parliament last Friday, which introduces labour contracts for staff aimed at speeding up the privatization of health care.

The changes would increase job insecurity and make it easier for hospitals to hire nurses on temporary contracts. Other changes would increase the working hours for certain groups of health care professionals, such as radiologists and physical therapists.

On the sixth day of the sit-in protest (March 22), in the gallery of the main hall of parliament, five nurses out of the group announced a hunger strike in pursuit of their demands. The remaining nurses say they will continue their occupation of the gallery.

Around a hundred nurses gathered to picket in support of the strike in a demonstration in front of the Sejm buildings.

Currently nurses are striking in Stargard and there is a hunger strike of nurses in Przemyśl. Several other labour disputes are also taking place in hospitals around the country.

Hungary: Air crew in warning strike for extension of rest time

A two-hour warning strike of pilots and flight attendants at airline company Malév took place March 23, demanding that the minimum rest time for crew members be extended by an hour or two.

Hunpalpa trade-union chief Tamás Óvári said that the strike had full support among union members.

Egyptian archaeologists threaten strike if ministry official is not appointed

Archaeologists threatened to organize a strike and sit-in on March 27 if a ministry official is not immediately appointed to take charge of archaeology-related affairs.

The strike threat comes in light of repeated thefts and lootings of Egyptian artefacts and relics.

The archaeologists sent a letter to Prime Minister Essam Sharaf in which they demanded the appointment of either a minister or head of an independent body affiliated to the Council of Ministers.

In the letter, Mohamed Abdel Maqsood, the director of the Central Administration for Antiquities in Alexandria and Lower Egypt, warned of

the seriousness of the situation, saying that it "has resulted in the total paralysis in the decision-making process needed for the continuance of archaeological work."

Abdel Maqsood went on to say that the current lack of any responsible official has hindered the work of the permanent committees of Egyptian antiquities, which are responsible for granting approval to foreign missions to work at archaeological sites.

Social workers in Israel in third week of strike

A strike by social workers across the country over employment conditions continues into a third week.

On March 19, almost 300 social workers demonstrated in Tel Aviv, briefly blocking a busy intersection, and faced police threats of arrests.

Social workers made it clear that they would continue their strike after rejecting an offer March 20 submitted by the Finance Ministry regarding the employment conditions of workers. The Histadrut union federation reportedly told social workers that the agreement reached with the Finance Ministry was the best that could be expected.

To exert official pressure on the striking social workers, Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz gave an interview this week to *Israel Radio* in which he said that if social workers "strike for one more minute, it is not justified."

Israeli doctors declare work dispute

A work dispute was declared March 20 between doctors in the public sector and the Finance Ministry after talks broke down on doctors' demands to improve their working conditions.

If no agreement is reached within the next 10 days, more than 20,000 doctors will go on strike for the first time in a decade. A doctors strike in 2000 lasted nearly five months.

Negotiations have been ongoing for over seven months on the severe lack of medical staff in hospitals and low wages.

Industrial action across Oman

Around 450 private security guards blocked the main Muscat airport road March 16 in a demonstration to demand higher pay.

A series of concessions by the ruling Sultan Qaboos bin Said have failed to halt a wave of unrest as protesters, inspired by demonstrations across the region, press political and social demands.

Activists have held sit-ins for weeks in front of the consultative Shura Council in Muscat, outside the governor's office in Salalah in the far south and in Sohar. They want better wages, more jobs, an elected parliament and a new constitution.

Qaboos, in power for 40 years, decided this week to cede some legislative powers to the partly elected Oman Council, an advisory body. At present, only the sultan and his cabinet can pass laws.

The government also announced it would double monthly welfare payments and increase pension benefits, following the offer of cash incentives to stop protests in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Around 200 workers at two refineries staged demonstrations March 20.

The protesters, along oilfield workers who went on strike last week, have complained that they are among the least-paid oil workers in the Gulf.

“We want higher pay, better pension, training, regular promotions and more Omanis in the management team,” Mohamed Al Harthi, one of the protesters at the Muscat refinery, said.

The two affected refineries are the Muscat refinery, with an output of 85,000 barrels per day, and the Sohar refinery, producing 120,000 barrels per day.

Oman produces about 800,000 barrels per day of oil, which accounts for more than 70 percent of the sultanate’s income.

Mali university teachers’ strike

University teachers belonging to the National Union of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Mali went out on strike March 19. The strike brought teaching at the capital City of Bamako University to a standstill and affected other tertiary education facilities across the country.

Teachers are striking to demand a review of salaries to bring them in line with those of academics in other countries in West Africa. They are also demanding the cancellation of taxes paid on bonuses and an end to levies being charged under the compulsory health insurance scheme.

The university teachers ended a previous strike in August last year after the intervention of Mali President Amadou Toumani Toute.

Swaziland workers protest calls for government to resign

Civil servants held a protest march, the biggest for several years, in the capital of Mbabane on Friday. They were joined by youth and other workers. The civil servants were protesting a pay freeze, but their demand for the government to resign struck a chord with other protesters. Many of them likened the situation to the revolts that have taken place throughout North Africa.

The marchers, including nurses, teachers and students, carried placards with slogans such as “Why cut salaries, cut corrupt government”. Swaziland is ruled by an autocratic monarch who pursues a lavish life style with 14 wives. Political parties are banned and 40 percent of the population of 1.5 million are unemployed, whilst 70 percent live on less than a dollar a day.

The landlocked kingdom has seen a 60 percent drop in its income from the Southern African Customs Union, a large part of the state revenue. Meanwhile the IMF is calling for cuts in public spending before Swaziland would be eligible for loans.

Nigerian academics to strike

At a press conference on Monday the Lagos polytechnic chapter of the Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP) issued a seven-day notice of strike action. The notice was issued following a congress, which was attended by sister unions from other states, held in the polytechnic.

Their demand is for lecturers at the polytechnic to be able to retire at 65 regardless of the length of service. This is the situation at other polytechnics and was agreed by the federal government. The Lagos

polytechnic staff have the backing of the national union.

The union has called on the Lagos state governor, Raji Fashola, to intervene and press the polytechnic authorities to meet their demands.

Lagos doctors strike continues

Doctors employed at the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital began strike action on February 5 over the failure of Lagos state to implement the federally agreed Consolidated Medical Salary Scale (CONMESS). There had been word that the state government was about to issue an agreement to meet the doctors' demands, but this was not forthcoming. The doctors are represented by the Medical Guild, which is affiliated to the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA).

The chairman of the guild, Dr. Ayobode Williams, announced doctors had not heard from the Lagos state government and declared: “The strike continues.”



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