

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

1 April 2011

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

German train drivers strike over equal pay

Drivers employed at privately run train companies in Germany launched another 24-hour warning strike Monday, to improve wages and working conditions, demanding that all rail workers be paid equally.

The action at six regional rail service companies in the city-state of Berlin and the states of Brandenburg and Saxony ground a significant part of the transportation system to a halt. Together these companies cover 15 to 20 percent of the country's passenger service.

The GDL trade union is demanding a 5 percent wage increase and better redundancy protection guarantees. There are 26,000 train drivers in Germany, 6,000 of whom work for private companies.

Earlier this month, national strikes affected cargo and passenger traffic.

Carrefour hypermarket workers strike over wages, jobs and conditions in France

French stores belonging to international hypermarket Carrefour S.A. could be affected by a one-day strike on April 9, when workers are due to stage a protest on wage levels, job cuts and working conditions. Carrefour's offer of a 1 percent increase in wages this month and a second 1 percent rise in October was overwhelmingly rejected in a ballot March 17.

Headquartered in France, Carrefour is the second largest retail group in the world in terms of revenue and third largest in profit, after Wal-Mart and Tesco.

Chamonix ski resort lift workers strike in pay, conditions dispute

Lift workers employed by the Compagnie du Mont Blanc (CMB) in the ski resort of Chamonix valley in France struck on Sunday in a dispute over pay and conditions. CMB used volunteers and scabs to keep the lift operations running.

In Brevant and Flegere, the lift price was reduced to €20 for the day in anticipation of some disruption.

In addition to pay and conditions, the workers have a series of local grievances and wider issues. According to information sent to *PlanetSKI*,

these include the immediate reintegration of a worker at La Blame ski station. It is claimed his employment was wrongly terminated. The web site also states that the workers are demanding "The passage of a long-term contract for all of the salaried seasonnaires who work 270 days or more per year" and "Sufficient staff at each site to ensure quality and safety to clients and staff."

Other demands are "The continuation of all employee salaries through the end of the season taken without mandatory paid vacation, without recovery of overtime imposed, whatever the snow conditions, given the company's results" and "An equitable distribution of the wealth of the company with an increase in wages following the same proportion as the increase in turnover."

Anti-austerity protests continue in Greece

Around 1,000 teachers, doctors and students demonstrated in central Athens Wednesday against the PASOK social democratic government's austerity measures. An estimated 700 people later rallied to parliament. On the same day, hospital doctors held a 24-hour strike.

State schoolteachers are protesting at a school merger plan. Vangelis Ioakimidis, a high school chemistry teacher who joined the protest, said, "Many provincial schools are several kilometres apart. Mergers will make it hard for children to get to school.... Poverty is a terrible thing, but lack of education is even worse."

Unprecedented austerity measures are being implemented by the government of Prime Minister George Papandreou. They are being imposed in return for a three-year, €110 billion (US\$155 billion) bailout loan package from the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund.

The credit ratings agency Standard & Poor's downgraded Greece's credit rating deeper into junk status this week, predicting Athens would need additional EU money. Deficit figures for 2010, due to be announced April 26, are likely to be higher than the 9.4 percent of gross domestic product officially predicted, due to revised GDP figures. Finance Minister George Papaconstantinou recently said, "The real question for us is: How can we get back into the markets in 2012?"

Greek refinery workers set to strike

Workers at Hellenic Petroleum, Greece's largest refiner, are to hold a 10-day strike beginning April 3 to demand more staff and an increase in pay.

The action was announced on Thursday by the workers' trade union and

is being held to demand increased pay and higher staffing levels at the new Thessaloniki gasoline refinery location. *Ta Nea* reported that the company offered a 4.7 percent increase in pay, whilst workers are demanding 18 percent wage increases. Greek newspaper *Kathimerini* reported that management also plans to introduce productivity assessments.

The strike is due to begin with the shutdown of the Aspropyrgos refinery, with the shutdown of the Thessaloniki refinery on April 6 and the Elefsina plant April 7.

According to trade union leader Panagiotis Ofthalmides, "They are trying to start the new gasoline unit in Thessaloniki without proper staffing". He added that the union expects Hellenic Petroleum management to appeal to a court to try to have the strike declared illegal.

Hellenic Petroleum is 35.5 percent owned by the Greek state, which has ordered state-backed firms to slash their wage bill as part of their EU-IMF-agreed austerity programme.

Thousands protest spending cuts in Northern Ireland

Thousands marched through the centre of Belfast in Northern Ireland last Saturday, protesting against UK government spending cuts. The march coincided with the 500,000-strong London demonstration against the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's public spending cuts of £85 billion.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions estimated that 6,000 workers and their families took part in a rally in front of Belfast's City Hall.

Firefighter Alan Cunningham said he attended the demonstration to show solidarity, "And to give a message to the politicians at Stormont that we are objecting to the proposed closure of 20 fire stations and the downgrading of such.

"We're here to provide a public service, we want to provide that service, we want to have the equipment and the manpower in order to provide the best service we can."

In Derry, a protest against the cuts was held in the city's Guildhall Square. Later that day, between 500 and 1,000 people marched from Derry to Altnagelvin Hospital to protest the health minister's decision to shelve a planned radiotherapy unit. The decision will result in people in Derry and Donegal having to continue to make the 200-mile round trip to the cancer centre in Belfast.

Finnish metalworkers strike towards blockade of nuclear plant

Metalworkers in Finland have taken industrial action towards establishing a blockade of the construction at Olkiluoto III, the country's long-delayed fifth nuclear power reactor, underway on the southwestern coast. The workers are protesting wage arrears and non-compliance of Finnish labour standards by Polish subcontractor, KMW Engineering.

KMW Engineering is behind on hundreds of thousands of euros in wage payments and has failed to keep overtime pay records. Reportedly, there has also been negligent over health and safety matters.

The French nuclear company Areva is the main contractor for Olkiluoto III, which is being built alongside two other nuclear reactors by the private sector Finnish energy company Teollisuuden Voima Oy (TVO). Olkiluoto III is already three years behind schedule and believed to be €1.5 billion over budget.

10,000 Serbian public sector workers protest in the capital

More than 10,000 teachers, doctors, and other public sector workers protested March 25 in Belgrade, demanding pay rises and improved working conditions.

Initially called by three out of four education unions, whose members have been on strike since late January, other unions joined the protest to demand urgent talks with the government on increasing wages.

The average net wage paid in February in Serbia was 35,538 dinars (around €350).

Serbia has been dramatically reducing public costs and freezing public salaries. The government has agreed with the International Monetary Fund to a budget deficit of 4.1 percent of gross domestic product in 2011, down from 4.8 percent last year.

The protestors marched along main streets in the capital Belgrade to the government building, to hand in their written demands to the office of Serbian President Boris Tadic. Among the demands were requests for all delayed wages to be paid by March 28, a revision of April salaries and another one by the end of 2011, as well as a change of the existing law on education by the start of the next school year in September.

Workers at Haifa Chemical in Israel strike over pay and conditions

Workers at Haifa Chemical in Israel held an eight-hour strike March 21. The workers also quit the Histadrut trade union federation, in response to what they said was a lack of progress in negotiations over a pay increase of 10 percent and voluntary retirement for first-generation workers.

The workers have joined the Democratic Workers Organisation, a group that was founded in 2007 as a rival to the national union federation. In a statement, the organisation said the workers made the move in response to "hostile treatment and incitement" practiced by Haifa Chemical against the workers' association. It said the Histadrut "not only did not support the workers, they justified the actions of the management."

Negotiations with management, launched through the Histadrut in December, have reached no agreement. The statement claimed the company also spread lies against the workers' committee, and that the Histadrut did not respond to these provocations and instead decided to hold a meeting with the company management with the purpose of reaching a final deal without the participation or endorsement of the workers' committee.

Kenyan railway workers strike

Last Friday more than 200 Rift Valley Railway (RVR) workers at Nakuru joined colleagues in Mombasa and Nairobi when they came out on strike. The workers were protesting the scrapping of allowances and the dismissive attitude of the RVR management towards their attempts to address their grievances.

Zambian copper smelter workers strike

Around 600 workers, members of the National Union of Mining and

Allied Workers union, went on strike Thursday of last week. The workers were demanding substantial pay increases and dismissed management's 12 percent offer. The miners currently earn around US\$100 a month.

The smelter at Chambishi, 370 km north of Lusaka, is jointly owned by China Nonferrous Metals Corporation and Yunnan Copper Industry. The smelter is situated in an economic zone enjoying tax breaks. With the soaring demand and, hence, price of copper, the smelter has been enjoying big profits.

Madagascar university lecturers may strike

Members of the lecturers' and researchers' union SECES ended a previous strike in January, when the government said it would address some of their demands. The new academic year was set to begin in April.

However, with the ongoing crisis in Madagascar and the fall of the government at the beginning of March, the agreement may not be implemented. The presidents of five out of six of the universities met recently with the former higher education minister, Athanase Tongaveio, who had negotiated the agreement with SECES in January.

SECES has said that if the new academic year does begin and the agreement is not adhered to, they will recommence their strike. The agreement had included payment of budgets, student grants and the salaries of teachers and administrative workers.

Namibian building workers strike

Construction workers employed by New Era Investment, members of the Metal and Allied Namibian Workers Union (MANWU), took wildcat strike action Monday in the capital Windhoek.

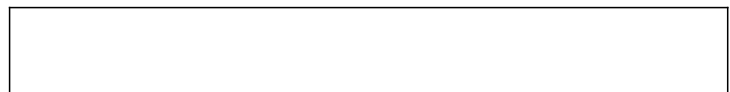
Their strike was to press their demands for improved terms and conditions of work. The workers are also concerned that the Chinese-owned company does not comply with Namibian labour law.

A union spokesman told *The Namibian* newspaper that the union plans to call for nationwide support for the strike. The union said the action should not just be limited to New Era Investment or Chinese construction firms, but should include any company not complying with Namibian labour law.

Nigerian judiciary workers strike

Judiciary workers in Akwa Ibom state have been on strike for two months. The members of the Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria (JUSUN) were pressing for the implementation of the federally agreed Consolidated Judiciary Staff Salary Structure (CONJUSS).

Following a directive from the union chairman, who claimed an agreement had been reached, some workers tried to return to work. Others accused the union chairman of taking a government bribe and stated that the supposed agreement does not meet their demands and vowed to continue the strike.





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