

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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

French energy workers in 24-hour strike over defence of benefit

Workers at the two energy giants Électricité de France (EDF) and Gaz de France (GDF Suez) held a one-day strike April 7, in response to moves to take away their preferential energy tariffs.

Under existing terms, over 300,000 staff benefit from the tariffs that means they pay between 5-10 percent of a normal energy bill. A previous attempt in 1983 to scrap the tariff resulted in a strike with 96 percent participation.

The industrial action resulted in a cut of over 14 percent of France's nuclear power capacity in 12 plants, according to a CGT union official. The power outages saw the equivalent of 10 nuclear plants—out of the country's total of 58—cease electricity generation.

Gas and supply deliveries were also halted across the country, as demonstrations took place in scores of French towns and regions, the largest of which involved thousands of EDF and GDF Suez workers at la Défense, Paris, the headquarters of the two companies.

Workers sliced 18,210 megawatts in global electricity capacity, including 2,700 megawatts in hydropower, according to officials. Germany reportedly exported 2 gigawatts of power to French traders during the strike.

EDF said 42.2 percent of workers were on strike by 10:00 GMT, while the CGT union said over 60 percent had downed tools.

The web site of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers Unions (ICEM) said “upwards of 80% of workers of the two former French government companies protested last Thursday”.

French workers have had the discounted rate plan since 1946, when the two companies were nationalised following World War II. The partial rate discounts currently amount to between €1,000 and €1,500 annually (which is taxed as income) and workers consider the discounts a complement to their now stagnant wages.

EDF is the world's largest utility company, with €65.2 billion in revenues in 2010 and operating a portfolio of 120,000+ megawatts of generation capacity in Europe, Latin America, Asia, the Middle-East and Africa.

GDF Suez was a French company that previously produced, transported and sold natural gas around the world. It was also involved in nuclear power generation through its part-owned Belgian subsidiary SPE. The company merged with the utility company Suez in 2008 to form GDF Suez.

Cabin crew pay strike grounds Berlin flights

A pay dispute involving budget airline Easyjet resulted in a limited warning strike by cabin staff at Berlin's Schönefeld airport April 7.

Some flights out of Schönefeld airport were cancelled. Connections to Basel in Switzerland, Thessaloniki in Greece and Olbia on the Italian island of Sardinia were cancelled, along with the return flights, Schönefeld airport announced.

Easyjet employs around 240 flight attendants and 110 pilots at Schönefeld.

Greek journalists in four-day strike

Greek journalists called a four-day strike April 7 in protest at the government's austerity measures, leading to a nationwide news blackout.

While television channels aired pre-recorded material and radio stations played back-to-back music, newspapers ceased publication for several days. News web sites also shut down for the duration of the action.

Athens journalists are demanding the rehiring of colleagues recently laid off at several newspapers and TV stations and the cancellation of individual employee agreements that replace previous collective agreements, resulting in large pay cuts.

Journalists marched to the National Parliament in Athens April 8 to demand a halt to layoffs and reductions in wages.

Greek workers have held several general strikes and demonstrations since the government unveiled austerity measures, including a cut to pensions and wages, increasing of taxes and raising of retirement age, inspired by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund €110 billion (\$140 billion) bailout package.

Scottish print room council staff to stage further walkout

Print room staff at Aberdeenshire Council headquarters will stage another walkout from April 18, as a long-running dispute over restructuring enters its sixth week.

Talks with management at the local authority failed to reach an agreement earlier this week.

Council workers took action last month following what they described as a “sham” consultation process. They argue that new structures contain jobs with roles and responsibilities that make no sense to those who have worked in the imaging and printing unit for many years.

Among the duties performed by print room staff is the production of

polling cards for elections. Work has slowed significantly as a result of the ongoing action. It is also believed the council was forced to draft in engineers from Brighton and London to complete repairs.

Finnish paper workers continue pay strikes

Industrial action over a pay dispute with the Forest Industries Federation in the paper industry is to shift focus from the firm UPM-Kymmene to Metsäliitto and Stora Enso from April 27.

The paper workers' union Pro said in a statement that around 1,500 members would take part in the fortnight-long strikes at Metsäliitto and Stora Enso sites. The strike affecting UPM-Kymmene is to end next week.

Thousands attend Budapest demonstration against EU austerity

Around 10,000 workers demonstrated April 9 in Budapest against austerity measures, while European Union finance ministers closed a two-day meeting in nearby Godollo.

The ministers' meeting confirmed Portugal was next in line for tough austerity measures resulting from a "rescue" package.

The demonstrators, which included French teachers and Polish miners, marched through the centre of Budapest, many carrying banners of protest.

Lucinda Damasos, marching with the Portuguese general workers union (UGT), said wages had already fallen before the announcement the previous day that Portugal is set to receive a bailout of around €80 billion (\$130 billion) on condition of major budget cuts.

"Portuguese workers should not have to pay for the crisis," said Damasos.

Turkish Cypriot workers stage further protests opposing austerity

On April 7, around 5,000 Turkish Cypriot workers staged further protests in front of parliament against austerity measures.

The parliament building was ringed by riot police and some minor scuffles broke out when protesters confronted plainclothes policemen in the crowd.

Protest organizers claim that pay cuts in the private and state sector are being carried out by the Turkish Cypriot government on Turkey's orders. Cyprus's northern government is only recognized by Turkey, which maintains some 35,000 troops, since its 1974 invasion and division of the island.

Saudi unemployed graduates protest over jobs

Dozens of unemployed university graduates and teachers staged protests in Riyadh and Jeddah April 10 to demand jobs and better wages.

Over 20 protesters gathered outside the education ministry office in Jeddah, while around 20 collected outside the ministry in the capital Riyadh, witnesses and participants said.

Reuters quoted Omar Alharbi, a 34-year-old father of six and Arabic language teacher in a private school making only 1,800 riyals (\$480) a month, below the country's unemployment handout of 2,000 riyals:

"God willing, I'll be here until Friday if I have to. We don't care anymore after seven years of unemployment. We have no other choice... I plan to stay here until we find a solution," he said.

Some of the protesters said they had been unemployed since 2003. They estimated the number of unemployed Saudi Arabic language teachers to exceed 10,000.

In an attempt to prevent the public discontent gripping much of the Middle East and north Africa from igniting Saudi society, King Abdullah recently ordered social handouts exceeding \$100 billion to be spent on housing, infrastructure, health care and security. It also included a 2,000 riyal unemployment benefit.

Saudi Arabia has not yet seen the kind of mass uprisings that have rocked large parts of the region this year, but a number of protests have taken place in the Eastern Province where most of the kingdom's crucial oilfields are located.

Earlier this year, around 250 unemployed graduates gathered at the education ministry in Riyadh to demand employment and vowed to continue demonstrating until the government produces jobs.

Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil exporter and a key US regional ally. The absolute monarchy does not tolerate public dissent. There is no elected parliament or political parties, and newspapers carry the official line of the ruling House of Saud.

Among the 15 to 24 age group, unemployment in Saudi Arabia is reported to be almost 40 percent.

Strikes and protests by Iranian workers spread to large factories

Workers at two major industrial enterprises in the country's southern province of Khuzestan are on strike, according to April 12 reports on RFE/RL's Radio Farda.

Around 1,500 workers at the Imam Port Petrochemical Complex have gathered in front of its headquarters since April 9 to demand their work contracts be concluded directly with the plant's management rather than with contractors.

According to the Free Union of Workers in Iran, 1,000 workers at the Pars Paper Mill in southwestern Iran similarly launched a strike on April 9. They are protesting the dismissal of 60 workers who were on temporary contracts with the factory.

Norway-based labour activist Sadegh Kargar told Radio Farda on April 10 that strikes and protests by workers are now spreading to large factories. He said the main reasons for such actions are workers' dissatisfaction with their wages and a lack of job security.

"So far, Iranian authorities have not reacted to the strikes, which have not been reported by state media," reported RFE/RL's Radio Farda.

Unemployed Omanis gather at capital roundabout

Over 1,000 job seekers gathered at Muscat's Bait Al Barka roundabout demanding employment, April 11 and 12.

Traffic on this main artery linking the Omani capital with the country's north became congested due to the protests. Eyewitnesses said people started coming to the roundabout late on Monday night and their numbers grew to more than 1,000.

Through an announcement on a local Arabic FM radio station, the Royal Oman Police advised people travelling from Muscat to the Batinah region in the north, or vice versa, to take the new Muscat Expressway to bypass the Bait Al Barka roundabout, which involves the main highway that runs through the northern region and connects with neighbouring UAE as well as leading to the residential palace of Oman's ruler Sultan Qaboos Bin Saeed.

The police advice did not mention the protest.

The security forces later converged at the roundabout in large numbers.

Protests in Oman started in January with a "Green March" in Muscat and by the end of February spread to other cities in the country such as Salalah, Sur, Ibri and Sohar. In Sohar protesters had taken over the important Globe Roundabout for almost a month, blocking traffic movement. The army later took control of the roundabout and dispersed protesters, which triggered protests. One protester was killed in subsequent police action.

On April 9, the chief prosecutor announced that an Omani activist who "instigated riots" in the industrial city of Sohar will face trial with 25 others for violent conduct. He did not say when the accused would go to court or the exact charges.

Demonstrations in Oman, inspired by a wave of protests that have spread across the Middle East, have focused on demands for better wages, jobs and an end to corruption.

Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who has ruled Oman for 40 years, has already embarked on a series of reforms in an effort to hold onto power, including sacking 12 ministers, introducing a monthly allowance for the jobless and pay rises for civil servants.

South African diamond regulators strike

Workers at the South African and Precious Metal regulator went on strike last Friday. The workers are members of the National Union of Miners. The strike led to the disruption of diamond import and export. Workers are seeking a 10 percent pay increase and payment of a R1000 (\$150) housing allowance, rejecting the employer's 9 percent offer.

South African refuse collectors strike goes ahead

The proposed strike by the Johannesburg Pikitup workers started last Thursday. The refuse collectors are members of the South African Municipal Workers Union. Amongst their grievances is the way the company handled industrial relations disputes. They also charged the management of being corrupt and of irregularities in the way tenders were handled and called for an investigation into the company.

On Saturday, the Pikitup managing director resigned, followed by the board chairwoman and several board members. The union welcomed the resignations but still wants an investigation into their conduct.

Mozambique security guard dies as result of police brutality

The death was announced this week of a security guard, beaten by police when protesting outside the employer's offices last week in Maputo. The security guards work for the London-based Group Four

Securicor (G4S). They were protesting over unexpected deductions from their pay.

The demonstration was broken up by the Rapid Intervention Force using extreme violence. The police brutality was caught on camera by the independent television station STV.

As well as the death of one of the security guards, many others were seriously injured and were only able to receive hospital treatment following the intervention of a doctor from the Ministry of the Interior.

Zimbabwean pilots strike

Around 50 pilots working for Air Zimbabwe have been on strike for over three weeks. They went on strike to protest outstanding salary and allowances payments totalling \$12 million.

Last week a Labour court hearing deemed the strike illegal. A spokesman for the pilots said, "We have been given a lot of promises and until we are paid what they owe us we will not go back to work."

Zambia teachers' sit-in

Primary school teachers at Nkwazi primary school, Lusaka, staged a sit-in last week demanding improved conditions of service. The teachers are members of the Basic Education Teachers of Zambia and are unhappy with the delay in negotiations between the union and management. The union advised the teachers to return to work.



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