

# 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.

## Strike halts production at main Albanian chrome mine

A pay strike by 700 miners at the Bulqiza chrome mine, the country's largest, has shut down all production for the past two weeks. Industrial action began at the mine, owned by Austria's DCM DECOMetal, on July 4. The miners have been protesting in front of government offices in the capital, Tirana, this week.

According to *Reuters*, mine director Medat Zogu said DCM DECOMetal's section of the Bulqiza chrome basin had open reserves of 400,000 tonnes and it mined 70,000 tonnes a year. The mining corporation said July 19 that it would raise wages provided miners first halted their strike.

"We are going to be generous about the compensation of workers, but these strikes, threats and ultimatums have to stop," George Bedineishvili, DCM DECOMetal's country manager, told reporters.

The firm agreed to a 10 percent raise last week, half the figure that the miners are demanding.

## Striking Greek taxi drivers teargassed by police

*Reuters* has reported that taxi drivers have extended indefinitely a two-day strike against the government deregulation plans for the taxi sector.

Hundreds of drivers gathered on the mainland and on the Greek islands that are popular travel destinations for hundreds of thousands of tourists.

The action has caused disruptions around the country, particularly on Monday when several taxis blocked the motorway linking Athens to the capital's international airport, causing huge traffic jams. Temporary blockades at the ports of Piraeus and Patras forced some cruise ships to re-route to other harbours.

On Wednesday, the strikers again blocked key highways and threatened to cause further road disruption.

Taxi drivers who had gathered outside the Infrastructure and Transport Ministry office in Athens, briefly tried to enter the building, but were dispersed by police who fired teargas.

Last May, the European Union and the IMF issued Greece a €110 billion (\$160 billion) loan, but the Greek economy is still in serious crisis

and needs another bailout valued at around the same amount.

## British Sugar workers balloted for strike over pay

Workers at four plants owned by British Sugar, in the east of England, are to be balloted on industrial action after the workforce rejected a 3.5 percent pay offer.

The 250 staff at the plants at Wissingham, near King's Lynn, Cantley, near Great Yarmouth, Bury St. Edmunds and Newark in Nottinghamshire will be balloted within the next month on whether to strike or take industrial action short of a strike.

"Unite is seeking a pay deal equal to retail price index (RPI) inflation, currently running at five percent, plus 0.5 percent for the year April 2011-April 2012 for its members who include engineers and production staff," according to the union web site.

## UK rail workers balloted for action over equal pay for female workers

Thousands of managers and technicians at Network Rail are to be balloted for strikes because female staff are paid an average of £4,000 less than their male co-workers in the same roles.

The *Metro* newspaper reported the Transport Salaried Staffs Association as stating "that a strike could potentially lead to serious disruption across many of the UK's major rail routes."

It accused Network Rail of refusing to carry out a "fair pay audit" and of imposing a 2.5 percent wage rise on white collar workers—less than half of the 5.2 percent pay rise given to other employees. The ballot will end August 18.

## "Fair pay" protest by Sainsbury's workers outside AGM

On July 13, workers from retail giant Sainsbury's stores from across the UK protested outside the company's annual general meeting in London.

In a mocking take on the retail giants' advertising slogans, some workers wore T-shirts with a message to Sainsbury's chief executive Justin King reading: "Justin—try something new today, pay a living

wage.”

“Some staff went into the shareholders’ meeting to directly challenge management to pay staff fairly. Many of the workers protesting were wearing Justin King masks to hide their identity because of intimidation they have encountered from their managers,” according to the Unite union web site.

Up to 12,000 of its workers could receive a pay cut while Sainsbury’s continues to enjoy high profit margins.

### **Chernobyl workers protest benefit cuts**

Around 2,000 Chernobyl clean-up workers and other Ukrainian workers, affected by the 1986 nuclear disaster, gathered in front of the presidential office July 6 to protest benefit cuts.

Many of the protesting workers wore Chernobyl worker medals, shouted “Down with the authorities!” and waved black flags depicting a skull inside an atom.

“Organizers said the current 764 hryvna (\$95 or €70) pensions received by workers who cleaned up radioactive waste after the nuclear power plant explosion will be cut by 30 percent. Monthly benefits of about 5 hryvna for living in contaminated areas and free or low-cost trips to clinics are being virtually liquidated, they say,” according to a report by the *Associated Press*.

### **Staff at Egyptian Communication Ministry stage protest**

On July 17, dozens of employees at the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology organized a protest at the ministry’s headquarters to call for permanent contracts, reported *Al Mary Al Youm*.

“One of the employees said the ministry is dragging its feet on the issue even though other ministries have already taken this step,” said the news source.

According to MENA, the state news agency, the same employee complained that the ministry has reduced the pay of some engineers by 40 percent.

The workers are calling for the hiring of 1,800 employees on a permanent basis and a restructuring of salaries. They complain of wage disparities at the ministry.

### **Israeli doctors step up strike**

Hundreds of resident doctors abandoned their posts in hospitals across the country, July 19, and announced an indefinite strike the following day against a deal being drafted between the Israel Medical Association and the Finance Ministry to end the doctors’ strike.

“By early afternoon, residents had deserted their shifts and began picketing in the parking lots at Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv, Meir Hospital in Kfar Sava, Sheba Medical Center in Be’er Sheva, Rambam Medical Center in Haifa and the Shalvata Mental Health Center in Hod Hasharon,” according to *Haaretz*.

Walkouts also took place at the Shalvata, Geha, Ness Ziona and Eitanim psychiatric hospitals, Assaf Harofeh Medical Center in Zerifin, Hillel

Yaffe Medical Center in Hadera, the Chaim Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer, Barzilai hospital in Ashkelon and Loewenstein Hospital Rehabilitation Center in Raan.

One doctor outside Meir Hospital in Kfar Saba told *Ynet*, “If the agreement is not revised we will take our protest to the next level. The government is dismissive of us and is trying to humiliate us. We’ll fight to the end.”

The medical staff are “dissatisfied with the IMA’s readiness to compromise and are trying to persuade the body to maintain its reserve and not be pressured into any agreement which they believe debases the medical profession.”

According to *Ynet*, a “statement by some 600 physicians announced that they were no longer interested in having the Israel Medical Association represent them, and have formed a new body—“Mirsham” (Hebrew for “Prescription”).”

Opposition is particularly focused against a stipulation that staff clock in and out of work every day. Doctors have refused this demand for years. Staff have suggested a location-based smartphone application that can be pressed when entering and leaving the hospital.

The doctors are also opposed to the lengthy validity period of the agreement. The Finance Ministry hopes to secure a deal that would last 10 years.

### **Agricultural produce workers barricade inside company’s Tel Aviv office**

Around 300 workers employed at Agrexco, Israel’s largest exporter of agricultural produce, barricaded themselves inside the company’s Tel Aviv office July 19, while more workers protested outside.

“The workers were protesting against the government, the Finance Ministry, and the company’s court-appointed trustee manager, Shlomo Nass, who had said 200 workers had to go on unpaid leave or be fired,” according to a *Haaretz* report.

If the workers are fired, they won’t receive the severance compensation they are owed under their collective bargaining agreement, due to the company’s poor financial situation.

If all the company’s employees—350 in Israel and 180 abroad—are fired, none are likely to receive severance.

As of Thursday, around 80 of the 200 workers were continuing to barricade themselves in the headquarters.

### **Nigerian telecom workers strike**

Telecom workers employed at Airtel Nigeria call centres and shops went on strike Monday. Call centres in Iganmu, Lagos, Asokoro and Abuja came to a halt. The workers are contracted out to Airtel by SPANCO. They protested several issues, including staff welfare and the fact that the contracted workers did not receive bonuses paid to Airtel staff.

Some of the workers fear the company is trying to provoke a reaction leading to their dismissal, amidst rumours that it is planning to recruit fresh graduates through the National Youth Service Corps in a bid to cut its wage bill.

### **Nigerian unions call off planned strike over minimum wage**

The planned three-day strike due to begin Wednesday this week was called off by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). The nationwide strike had been planned to pressure the central government, state governments and private employers to bring in the N18,000 (£118) minimum wage promised by Goodluck Jonathan in his recent successful presidential election campaign. The minimum wage became law three months ago, but has not been widely introduced.

The NLC has suspended the action following last-minute talks with central government and representatives of the 36 state governments.

According to NLC acting general secretary, Owei Lakemfa, there will be further talks with the government due to be concluded on July 31 with the minimum wage brought in from August 1 and payment of arrears from April to July.

### **South African engineering workers return to work**

A two-week strike by 170,000 engineering workers has ended. The majority of the workers are represented by the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA). They had demanded a 13 percent pay increase against the employers' offer of around 7 percent, and a two-year agreement rather than the current three-year deal.

Following talks, workers in the lowest grade have been offered 10 percent while those on artisan grades have been offered 8 percent in the first year, 8 and 7 percent in the second year and third year, with a proviso that should inflation go above 8 percent the increase will be the inflation rate plus 2 percent.

Currently inflation is around 5 percent, but prices on basic commodities are rising rapidly, with dire consequences for the majority of the population, who are on low wages.

The employers rejected the union demand for a two-year settlement.

### **South African fuel and chemical workers strikes continue**

Around 70,000 workers in chemical, paper and other related industries represented by the Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union are in the second week of their dispute. They were joined last week by 14,000 members of the South African Chemical Workers' Union and 10,000 members of the General Industrial Workers' Union of South Africa. Workers in related industries represented by the smaller Solidarity union also came out on strike last week.

They are seeking pay rises of between 11 and 13 percent, six months maternity leave, as well as a ban on the use of labour brokers. The employers have made an offer of around 7 percent. Talks between the union and employers' representatives have been taking place this week.

Workers in fuel distribution are part of the dispute, leading to widespread fuel shortages. Fuel retailer Engen, which runs over 500 fuelling sites across the country, says more than half are now dry. Economists estimate the strike will cost the economy billions of rand.



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