

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

19 August 2011

General strike threatened in Italy in response to austerity package

The leader of Italy's largest union, the General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) has threatened a general strike to head off growing anger at the austerity package of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's government.

No date has yet been set for industrial action.

The austerity package—ostensibly to balance the budget by 2013 and avoid financial collapse—was passed last week in response to demands by the European Central Bank. The €45.5 billion (US\$64.8 billion) worth of cuts will fall heaviest on the working class in the form of spending reductions, job cuts and tax increases.

Berlusconi boasted that the austerity measures had won the praise of the European Central Bank and leaders including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, according to the Associated Press. European Union President Herman Van Rompuy called the measures “crucially important” not just for Italy—the eurozone's third largest economy—but for all of Europe.

TransPennine rail workers in England to strike in pay dispute

Two 24-hour strikes have been called on First TransPennine Express (FTPE) trains in England following a pay dispute.

Members of the RMT and Aslef trade unions voted for industrial action after rejecting a 2.2 percent pay offer, which would actually amount to a substantial pay cut. Train drivers, conductors and station staff will be advised not to report for work.

The planned strikes are scheduled to take place on August 24 and 26. The rail company operates services between Leeds, York, Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, Hull and Newcastle.

Journalists' strike in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, in fifth week

The strike by 25 journalists employed by the Johnston Press-owned *South Yorkshire Newspapers* has now entered its fifth week.

The local media workers, on strike since July 15, are protesting 18 planned job cuts.

Johnston Press is one of four UK media companies that, between them, control around 70 percent of the regional and local media. It publishes 18 daily papers, 245 weekly papers and runs 273 local web sites, which together have a 17.5 million monthly readership.

In recent years, Johnston Press made profit margins of around 30 percent, and embarked on a series of acquisition and asset-stripping measures borrowing hundreds of millions of pounds from city institutions

to finance them.

However, in the wake of the economic crisis, it was with debts approaching half a billion pounds. In response, it is pushing through over 400 job cuts.

On August 6, around 100 striking journalists and their supporters marched through the town centre and held a protest in Doncaster, South Yorkshire.

At the rally, the *South Yorkshire Times* editor, Jim Oldfield, called for the parliamentary investigation into Murdoch's *News International* to be extended to include the regional press including Johnston Press. The following Monday, according to the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), Oldfield received a letter from Johnston Press informing him he had been made redundant.

Northern Ireland health, education staff ballot over job cuts

Health and education employers in Northern Ireland have been officially served notice of a ballot on whether to take industrial action over job cuts.

The vote is in response to a cut of £1.35 billion in Northern Ireland's budget. Senior officials have indicated that the health budget up until 2015 is £800 million short of what is needed to be able to run the service efficiently, while one union has predicted that up to 1,000 jobs in education could be lost.

The members of the public sector unions, Unison and Nipsa, are to vote between August 20 and September 22.

Spain's professional football players to strike over pay guarantee

Professional footballers in Spain are to strike to support a guaranteed wage fund so they are paid even if their clubs go bankrupt.

According to *Caycompass.com*, the players at Real Madrid, Barcelona and others are united in pressing for the guarantee. The Association of Spanish Footballers chief Luis Rubiales, announced, “Players from the first and second divisions have made the decision to call a strike for the first two matchdays of the season. The players have met with us and decided that enough is enough.

“We are unanimous in our decision”, he continued. “The league will not start until a new agreement has been signed.”

The top division, La Liga, is set to start on the weekend of August 20-21. Second-tier club Hercules have struggled to pay some of their players recently, while Real Zaragoza applied for administration in the summer.

Rail strike in Poland paralyses country

Workers at the country's largest rail operator, PKP Przewozy Regionalne struck August 17 over a pay rise, forcing the cancellation of over 2,500 trains on routes across Poland. The meagre union-sponsored demand of a 280 zloty (barely €67) raise, has been refused by management in favour of 120 zloty (€30).

In early July, a nationwide warning strike was staged which halted Przewozy Regionalne's services for two hours. The rail operator carries 300,000 passengers daily.

Iceland's playschool teachers in dispute

A strike is to take place in schools across Iceland if a wage dispute between kindergarten teachers and local governments in Iceland is not resolved by August 22.

School staff are demanding comparable pay as others with the same level of education.

Haraldur F. Gíslason, chairman of the Icelandic Kindergarten Teachers' Union, told the radio station *Bylgjan* that he fears employees of playschools will leave their positions if their demands are not met.

According to *Iceland Review*, a strike among kindergarten teachers could affect an estimated 14,000 homes in Iceland.

Gíslason said there are around 240 playschools in Iceland, only a few of which are private. The strike would not affect those schools. Although not all playschools in the capital, Reykjavík, will be shut in the event of a strike, in Iceland's second city, Akureyri, all kindergartens would close.

Egypt's doctors to renew strike over wages and corruption

Egypt's Doctors' Coalition is preparing strike action on September 10 to demand the dismissal of "corrupt" state appointees and better wages and security at hospitals.

The *Daily News Egypt* said the threat of a renewed strike came after two unsuccessful meetings between doctors and Health Minister Amr Helmy.

Doctors are demanding the dismissal of 10 of the minister's assistants, who they say were appointed by the former regime of Hosni Mubarak. They are also protesting the fact that the decision to increase wages has not yet reached hospitals, and they have not received incentives for August.

Doctors organized two partial strikes on May 10 and 17, with more than 80 percent participation nationwide.

Railway workers in Egypt protest for equal pay

Over 600 workers at Tanta railway station in the Gharbiya Governorate in Egypt protested August 17 to demand that their bonuses be equalized to those of their colleagues who work on long-distance rail transit.

Al Masry Al Youm reported that after a similar demonstration the day before, "the workers gathered at 10 am Wednesday, blocking railroad traffic and engaging in fights with angry passengers.

"They said they made the move after futile negotiations with officials."

When workers refused to end their sit-in, police sought to move them by force before they were pacified by a delegation from the Gharbiya Governorate office. At the same time, train conductors at Mansoura station in Daqahlia Governorate staged a strike demanding bonuses equal to those of technicians and other workers.

The strike brought Mansoura's rail traffic to a standstill, as the conductors refused to leave the station until their demands were met.

Renewed public health strike in Israel

Doctors in Israel renewed industrial action on August 14 that has been conducted intermittently since April. The strike takes place under conditions in which the Israel Medical Association [IMA] has agreed to hold mediation talks with the Ministry of Finance.

The points of conflict between the doctors and the Finance Ministry are the length, cost and distribution of the agreement, as well as the requirement that doctors clock in for shifts.

The strike affects all government general, psychiatric and geriatric hospitals. Outpatient clinics and departments in these hospitals were closed to outpatients, and only urgent operations were performed. The strike also included all Clalit community physicians, family clinics and specialists' clinics.

General practitioners also demonstrated at Kikar Hamedina in Tel Aviv to demand a reduction in the patient-doctor ratio and increased resources for outlying medical services.

Workers at Israeli tyre factory protest

Around 500 people marched from the Pri Hagalil factory in Hatzor HaGlilit, Israel towards Highway 90 in protest against the factory management's decision to lay off 58 workers, according to *ynetnews*.

Some of the demonstrators burned tyres at the entrance to Hatzor HaGlilit.

Namibian construction workers strike

Six hundred Namibian construction workers employed by Grinaker LTA to develop the Langer Heinrich uranium mine went on strike Monday in a dispute over retrenchment payments. The project is in its final phase and is due to finish shortly.

Contract workers are due a month's pay for every year they have worked on completion but the company is saying that it does not have the money.

Workers are bussed in for the job. When they attempted to return to work Tuesday, the company insisted they pledge not to strike again. They refused, and returned home. They were then told there would be no buses the next day and those being retrenched would receive letters terminating their contracts. In the meantime, work has come to a standstill.

Nigerian civil servants continue strike over minimum wage

Civil servants in Enugu state, Nigeria, staged a three-day warning strike to demand the state government pay the nationally agreed minimum wage. The strike had been called by the state chapter of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trades Union Council.

However, in opposition to the union leaders, after the three day action, the workers continued the strike to push their demand. On Monday, they held a meeting which took a vote of no confidence in the state NLC leadership. On Tuesday the workers held marches and rallies throughout the state.



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Kenyan council workers strike

Around 25 municipal workers, members of the Kenya Local Government Workers Union in the town of Sotik, were on strike last week over arrears of wages amounting to Sh3.9million (\$42,000). According to a union official the workers are owed two months' salary.

Ethiopian airline dispute

Workers at Ethiopian Airlines are in dispute with their employer. The workers are pushing for a new collective agreement. Ethiopian Airlines has introduced a fleet of Boeing 777-200 aircraft but there is no provision under the current agreement as to how to structure crew rotations, etc.

The Ethiopian Federal Labour Affairs Board has set a hearing for August 24 to reach a new agreement.

Talks arranged on cleaners' strike in South Africa

Cleaners represented by seven trade unions in South Africa are on strike demanding a minimum wage of R4,200 (\$590) for all those currently on less, and a 10 percent increase for those earning above that figure. They are also seeking an extra month's pay cheque per annum, an eight hour day and other concessions.

Cleaners represented by the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) began their strike last Monday, with cleaners represented by other unions subsequently joining the strike.

Talks between the employers and the cleaners represented by SATAWU were scheduled for Monday of this week but to date no announcement has been made as to their result.

South African municipal workers begin strike

Around 200,000 municipal workers represented by the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) went on strike Monday. They are seeking an 18 percent pay increase. The employers' body, the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), is offering 6 percent.

Striking workers have held rallies and marches in towns and cities throughout the country.

Thirteen strikers were arrested on Tuesday in Cape Town after being confronted by police.