

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

21 October 2011

## Building workers may strike at major UK construction firm

Around 1,000 builders employed by construction firm Balfour Beatty are to be balloted for industrial action over imposed contractual changes that could see thousands of workers' wages cut by one third.

In May this year, Balfour Beatty, and six other leading construction companies, revealed an intention to withdraw from five long-standing agreements and impose new semi-skilled grades with significant cuts in pay. The Unite union said it was balloting workers at Balfour Beatty first, as it believes the firm was acting as the "ring-leader."

Bernard McAulay, Unite national officer, said that he hopes "the threat of strike action will bring Balfour Beatty to its senses and back to the negotiating table."

## North London council staff in repeat strike over outsourcing

Staff at Barnet Council, North London, have gone on strike for the second time in protest at outsourcing plans, which the Unison union says will endanger 70 percent of jobs and the quality of services.

In March, Barnet Council approved a plan to save £53.4 million over three years. A 24-hour strike took place in September at the council.

## Austrian metal workers hold first strike in a quarter century

Austrian metal workers went on a 24-hour strike October

14, seeking a 5.5 percent wage increase and warned that they would carry out open-ended walkouts if a pay dispute was not settled.

According to *Reuters*, "Around half of the country's 165,000 metal workers have voted to support the strike, the first in the Austrian metal industry for 25 years.

"The strikers are targeting 150 businesses in the Alpine country, including specialist steel group Voestalpine."

"The metal workers say employers must take into account 2.8 percent annual inflation earlier this year and healthy industrial growth. Inflation reached 3.6 percent in September, according to the national definition."

Employers are offering no more than a 3.65 percent wage rise with a €200 (\$274) one-off payment.

Some of the workplaces where 24-hour stoppages took place last Friday included the engine-maker MAN in Steyr; Opel assembly at Aspern Airfield; Opel powertrain at Donaustadt; Schindler-Aufzüge in Vienna; Doppelmayr chair lifts in Wolfurt; Bosch in Hallein; Magna car parts in Steyr; Andritz AG in Graz; and Salinen AG salt mines in Ebensee.

## Portuguese general strike to coincide with draft austerity budget

On Monday, the country's two largest unions proposed holding a general strike to protest against the government's austerity plans to coincide with its presentation of a draft budget to parliament. A date for a strike is to be decided this week.

Portugal last had a general strike in late November, which according to unions was the largest ever.

The government has been cutting spending and raising taxes to meet the terms of a €78 billion (\$108 billion) European Union/International Monetary Fund bailout.

## Workers at Telecom Egypt strike

Several hundred staff at Telecom Egypt (TE) staged a protest in Opera Square October 17 and began an open-ended strike for the release of five colleagues. The five workers are being held in detention for 15 days pending sentencing over the charges of the attempted murder of chief executive Mohamed Abdel Rehim.

Around the country, staff at 40 other telecommunication centres struck in solidarity with their detained colleagues. Thirty were located in Greater Cairo and 10 in other governorates.

According to *Ahram Online*, “The workers say Abdel Rahim was visiting the Opera branch, and employees gathered to tell him their demands. He went to an office in the building and sent them a messenger, telling them he would not succumb to any of their demands.”

One worker explained, “So the workers started a sit-in in front of his office, but nobody attacked him. He locked himself in from inside the room, and didn’t want to go out, but he was still able to receive whomever he wanted to.”

*Ahram Online* reports, “In addition to the release of their colleagues, which they consider a priority, workers demanded the resignation of CEO Mohamed Abdel Rahim and the company’s board of directors, whom they accuse of corruption and of causing financial losses to the company. They also demanded revision of the salaries of the company’s high officials.”

## Junior faculty staff in Israel strike

Junior faculty staff at universities and colleges across the country declared a 24-hour strike against pay and substandard working conditions for October 30. The strike will take place on the first day of the new academic year.

Around 9,300 faculty members are involved in the dispute and they teach half of the classroom hours in Israeli universities and colleges.

Africa

## Zambian miners resume strike

Around 2,000 miners, members of the National Union of

Mine and Allied Workers and working for the Chinese owned NFC Africa Mining, resumed their strike on Tuesday this week in pursuit of a 100 percent pay rise. They had been on strike at the beginning of the month seeking a pay rise of 2 million Zambian kwacha, (\$400) a month.

According to the union president, Mundia Sikufele, the government had asked the mine management to pay the increase.

The recent presidential election in Zambia was won by Michael Sata. In his campaign he made criticism of foreign investment and called for an improvement in workers’ conditions. However, according to Sikufele, “The government, which had proposed the 2 million kwacha, is now saying the right procedure is for the workers to allow the union to negotiate with the management.”

## Namibian airport workers threaten strike in opposition to union

Around 50 workers at Eros airport in Windhoek held a meeting last week. Their grievances included levels of allowances paid, outstanding overtime payments and the progress of pay talks. They complained at their union’s lack of progress in talks with management of National Airports Company (NAC).

The Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU) held a joint press conference at the weekend with NAC. In a joint statement they said any strike action by the 50 workers would be illegal and that they had agreed in a memorandum of understanding document earlier in the year.

Sandra Kazemberuka, a spokesperson for the workers, explained, “That document was not discussed with the workers so to us it is invalid.” She went on to say the workers would go ahead with their strike plan.



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