

# 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.

## Portuguese general strike disrupts public services and transit systems

Yesterday, a general strike in Portugal in protest at austerity measures linked to a €78 billion (\$104 billion) bailout of the country caused widespread disruption. The country's two largest trade union confederations, representing just over one million mostly blue-collar workers, said they had held 34 protest marches.

The action caused more than 470 international flights to be cancelled, while some one million commuters had to make their way to work without regular bus or train services. The Lisbon subway was closed all day. Government offices, schools, postal deliveries and refuse collection services were also severely affected.

The government has enacted tax hikes and cuts in pay and welfare entitlements as seeks to make the working population pay for the economic crisis.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "Public workers and retirees are so far the hardest-hit, after being told they will see their 2012 and 2013 salaries cut if they make more than €1,000 a month."

Reuters said the Portuguese "economy is expected to shrink 1.9 percent this year and at least 2.8 percent in 2012, in what is likely to be Portugal's worst recession since the 1974 revolution. Unemployment is at 12.4 percent, the highest level since the 1980s."

## Greek workers in general strike against new austerity budget

Private sector workers and civil servants are to hold a 24-hour general strike on December 1 in protest at the latest round of austerity measures. The proposed strike will be the first major walkout since the anti-democratic installation of the new Greek coalition government led by top banker and prime minister Lucas Papademos.

According to the Associated Press (AP), on Tuesday in Athens, workers on the subway, tram and electric rail network held a four-hour work stoppage to protest measures that include suspending 30,000 civil servants on partial pay.

Electric workers also demonstrated outside the company's bill-issuing building to protest a new property tax that has been added to power bills.

The present government is negotiating the details of a second international bailout, worth €130 billion (\$175 billion), which the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund insist is dependent on even harsher austerity measures.

Papademos was in Frankfurt on Tuesday to meet with the ECB head Mario Draghi. Eurozone officials have demanded written assurances from Greece's main political leaders that they back the government in its deal with international creditors, reported AP.

## Fiat workers in two-hour stoppages at Italian plants over casualisation

Auto workers are to carry out a two-hour stoppage to protest plans by Fiat to scrap its existing labour contracts next year after the auto giant introduced more casual contracts at three of its five Italian plants in an attempt to increase production.

According to a report in *InAutoNews* the stoppage will be held every day until the next meeting of the FIOM union's central committee on November 29.

## Thousands march to save local elderly community hospital in Ireland

Around 5,000 workers marched in protest over Health & Safety Executive's (HSE) proposals to close the local community hospital for the elderly in Abbeylaxey, Co Laois.

"During the speeches after the protest, Deputy Flanagan and Deputy Sean Fleming of Fianna Fáil were both heckled by small sections of the crowd who were calling for the immediate reversal of the decision to close the hospital."

The HSE has stated that the capacity to deliver a "safe service" for residents is not possible due to funding cuts.

## UK housing maintenance workers may hold strike ballot over jobs, pay, hours

Housing maintenance workers employed by the contractor Morrison, based in Leeds, are to decide this whether to ballot for industrial action over 21 job cuts. Private contractor Morrison runs the social housing maintenance contract for Leeds City Council.

The 98 housing staff involved have an estimated 1,256 years of service. They face jobs cuts by Christmas and longer hours for no additional pay.

A report on the web site of the General, Municipal, Boilermakers union said, "Morrison has also written to the workforce seeking volunteers willing to increase their contractual hours of work to more hours during

the week and add Saturday working for no more money than they are paid now. The 90 days consultation notice includes this change so the company is trying to impose the increase in hours and cut in pay even if no one volunteers. The other issue is they are still sub-contracting out 30% of their work.”

Last week, Morrison’s apparently refused to allow the workers who are threatened by pay and job cuts to attend a “consultation” meeting.

### **Rail workers on Bulgarian network set for indefinite strike over jobs**

Railway workers employed by the national railway operator BDZ, its passenger and freight transport subsidiaries as well as the National Railway Infrastructure Company started indefinite strike yesterday in protest over planned restructuring, which is to result in over 2,000 job cuts.

According to the web site of the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), the workforce has been further angered by the company’s other steps, such as dismissal of union members; cutting of operational personnel and outsourcing various other activities. The unions also maintain that management is deliberately stalling on negotiations for new collective agreements.

Ekaterina Yordanova, president of Federation of Transport Trade Unions in Bulgaria, stated that the unions were taking strike action as a last resort, before adding: “Obviously, the new management wants to reform the company all by itself; but we would like to warn them that without the unions they will not succeed.”

### **Strike at Jerusalem light railway over pay and working conditions**

Jerusalem’s light rail suspended services November 16 due to an ongoing dispute between the train drivers and the systems operator over pay and working conditions, according to the *Jerusalem Post*. The CityPass consortium, which owns the light rail, told the *Post* that despite the resignation of “a number of drivers” they would operate the light rail from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.

On Monday, 20 light rail drivers submitted their resignations because of the failure to reach an agreement on improved working conditions with Connex, the light rail operator. By Wednesday, 28 drivers had resigned but Connex management decided to accept only the resignations of the four members of the light rail workers committee and another three drivers, reported the *Post*.

“In response, the rest of the drivers decided they would not turn up for work on Thursday unless the drivers whose resignations were accepted were reinstated,” said the paper.

“According to sources within Connex, the seven drivers whose resignations were accepted had expressed opposition to a proposed deal between Connex and the Histadrut labor federation to solve the dispute, while the remaining drivers were willing to accept it. In the end, they decided not to continue working due to concerns about the reaction of the committee,” reported the *Post*.

### **Israeli port workers strike over year end benefits**

A strike by workers at Ashdod Port severely disrupted work at the country’s largest port Monday. The dispute is over the fact that workers have used up their annual benefits, and management is prohibited from granting them additional incentives for the remaining month and a half of 2011.

A recent two-month work “slowdown” occurred over the so-called “steak incentive,” a bonus given to especially productive workers.

Half of Israel’s international commerce passes through Ashdod Port. *Ha’aretz* reported, “Handling workers have slowed down their work pace and the production levels have decreased,” said the Chamber of Shipping of Israel in a press release. “As usual the consequences accumulate slowly, but there are already delays in handling ships in the port, and ships awaiting entry.”

### **South African metal workers strike enters fifth week**

The strike by more than 4,000 metal workers at Xstrata Alloys has entered its fifth week.

The members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) began their strike on October 24. They work for Xstrata at its sites near Rustenburg and are seeking wage parity with Xstrata workers at the Lion ferrochrome smelter in Tubatse in Mpumalanga province.

Last week workers marched to the Swiss company’s headquarters in Johannesburg where they handed in a petition. As well as wage parity they are seeking a 10 percent pay increase and a R3500 (\$410) housing allowance.

Monday of this week the company presented its latest offer to NUMSA but it was rejected.

Xstrata is one of the biggest metal alloy producers in the world responsible for a third of global production.

### **Mozambique sugar workers strike**

Workers at the Mafambisse sugar company in Sofala province, central Mozambique went on strike at the end of last week. The strike was to protest the company’s decision not to follow the normal pattern of paying a bonus at the end of the season. According to workers the company has offered no explanation for its decision.

The Mafambisse sugar plantation and mill is controlled by the South African sugar group Tongaat-Hulett which has an 85 percent shareholding in the company.

### **Kenyan doctors give notice of strike**

Doctor belonging to the Kenya Medical Practitioners Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KMPDU) has passed a resolution of intention to strike on December 5 after attempts to negotiate with the government failed.

They are seeking a 400 percent pay increase. KMPDU general secretary Boniface Chitayi speaking to the press explained, “If our demands are not met, doctors will stay at home...But we are open to talks with the

government to avert a crisis.”

### **Kenyan council workers strike over wage arrears**

Around 40 permanent workers employed by the council in Yala, a rural town in western Kenya, were joined by casual workers when they came out on strike at the end of last week. They have not been paid their salary for the last eight months.

The town council chairman declared the strike illegal.

### **Nigerian power workers face lock out**

Striking workers, members of the National Union of Electrical Employees, at the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) are being locked out of power stations.

The government has drafted in armed policemen to control the company’s power supply installations.

The government claim the armed police have been brought in to counter the threat of an attack by the Boko Haram sect.



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