

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

4 November 2011

## Air France flight attendants in five-day strike

Flight attendants at Air France began a five-day strike from October 29 over employment contract changes.

According to Reuters, Air France was forced to cancel around one in five flights and warned of wider disruption in the middle of a traditionally busy holiday weekend. AFP reported that the cancellations amounted to around 200 flights.

One grievance of the flight attendants is a plan to reduce staffing on long-haul trips. Reuters reported that “shares in Air France-KLM, which is due to publish financial results on November 9, took a hit this week when a media outlet said it was preparing to issue a profit warning. The carrier said last Tuesday, in response to that media report, that it would not publish any financial information before November 9.”

Measured by revenue, Air France-KLM is Europe’s largest airline. It recently reported a first quarter net loss of €197 million (\$283 million).

## French oil refinery workers in 24-hour strike

On October 28, a one-day strike took place at the Petit Couronne oil refinery to protest plans to cut output. The refinery is owned by Swiss company Petroplus.

Reuters reported that Petroplus said it “planned to suspend next year’s turnaround of the base oil complex at the Petit Couronne refinery, which could include a shutdown of its base complex.”

This could directly affect around 120 of the 550 jobs at the site and many others indirectly reliant on the refinery. The Petit Couronne refinery processes around 150,000 barrels of oil a day.

According to Reuters, “The European refining sector has been struggling for years due to overcapacity and poor margins.”

French oil group Total shut its Dunkirk plant at the start of 2010 and Petroplus closed its Reichstett plant in May 2011.

## Austrian postal workers call for action over working conditions, jobs

Postal workers have called for industrial action due to changes associated with the “modernisation of Austrian Post’s network,” according to *Post and Parcel*, October 26. Workers are concerned about possible job losses.

The news source reported that the Federal Executive of the Union of Post and Telecommunications Staff (GPF) voted unanimously to push for a strike to protest what the latter described as “unfair treatment” of

workers.

*Post and Parcel* said a “massive” post office closure programme around the country had forced workers to move to preserve their chances of employment. “In particular, the union has been claiming that older workers are being persuaded to take a small payment to leave, and that those who refuse face dismissal,” said the postal news source.

## Finnish tech strike over pay and conditions

“Members of the Federation of Professional and Managerial Staff (YTN) went on strike at 6 a.m. Tuesday. The industrial action will affect some of the technology sector’s biggest companies,” reported YLE November 1.

The news source said that around 10,000 white-collar employees at technology firms including ABB, Wärtsilä and Metso are expected to participate in a dispute over pay and conditions.

Reuters reported November 2 the possible expansion of the strike next week to include mobile phone maker Nokia if a deal is not reached before November 7. According to Reuters, “YTN members at Nokia mainly work for research and development as well as management, and do not include workers assembling mobile phones at its Salo factory. But some managers overseeing manufacturing could be part of the strike, the union said.”

An expanded strike could affect other companies, such as Nokia Siemens Networks and stainless steel maker Outokumpu.

## Iceland Symphony Orchestra plan strike over new pay deal

Iceland Symphony Orchestra planned to go on strike this week if its members could not resolve a new pay deal around a demand for a 36 percent wage increase.

The Iceland Symphony Orchestra is an independent public institution under the Ministry of Education and its members are “technically public sector employees,” according to *Ice News*. “The Icelandic state has subpoenaed the orchestra union over whether or not the threatened strike has been organised in a legally-accountable manner,” the news site reported.

## Workers at Egyptian textile firm call for re-nationalisation of privatized company

On October 26, workers at the Shebeen al-Kom Spinning and Weaving Company “cut-off Qasr al-Aini street in downtown Cairo to demand the government implement a court order returning the privatized company to the state,” reported *Al Masry Al Youm*.

Central security forces dispersed the demonstrators, “clashing with the protesters who moved back to Qasr al-Aini Street and blocking the flow of traffic.”

The three companies—El-Nasr Boilers and Pressure Vessels Manufacturing, Tanta Flax and Oil and Misr Shebeen al-Kom Spinning and Weaving—were all sold between 1994 and 2006 to Egyptian and foreign investors at below their actual value.

In September, the Administrative Judicial Court ordered the re-nationalization of the three companies. The government has refused to carry out the order.

### **Bibliotheca Alexandrina workers stage protest**

Over 1,500 workers staged a protest October 26 outside the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, “preventing the director, Ismail Serag Eddin, and other officials from accessing the library and demanding they be sacked,” reported *Al-Masry Al-Youm*.

The workers were protesting authority refusals to provide permanent contracts for temporary workers, as well as the firing of 14 workers who oppose the administration’s policies.

The workers also demanded investigation of “the squandering of public funds and theft of artifacts from the library” and “questioning all directors related to the ousted [Mubarak] regime,” according to a statement issued by the protesters.

*Al-Masry Al-Youm* said, “Armored vehicles and army troops were called to intervene after arguments between the protesters and Serag Eddin became heated.”

Workers also demonstrated in March to depose Serag Eddin, labelling him “one of the figures of the ousted regime.”

*Al-Masry Al-Youm* concluded its report with the following: “Mostafa Bakry, a former independent member of parliament, filed a report with the Public Prosecution in March on the rigging of donations to the library, which were transferred to a bank account controlled by ex-first lady Suzanne Mubarak.

“Serag Eddin denied any knowledge of this bank account, which was found containing US\$147 million.”

### **Alexandrian flour mill workers threaten strike**

Workers at the Alexandria Flour Mills & Bakeries company (AFMC) have threatened industrial action at the firm’s five branches in Alexandria if their annual bonus is not raised to ten times their wages instead of its current four times, according to *Ahram Online*, October 27.

AFMC registered a net profit of LE2.182 million (US\$365,000) in the third quarter, a drop of 43 percent on the same period last year.

### **Workers at electrical products firm strike for first time since**

### **Mubarak’s fall**

On November 1, *Ahram Online* reported that “around 400 workers at El Sewedy Electric’s factory in 10th of Ramadan City downed tools Tuesday in the first strike at the Middle East’s leading electrical products manufacturer since Egypt’s president was ousted in February.”

The workers are demanding the payment of bonuses for seasonal occasions.

“Since the revolution, they have stopped paying us these bonuses although production [during the uprising] was only affected for a very short time,” a member of the factory’s syndicate was quoted by *Ahram Online*.

Starting in 2008, the administration began paying workers four instalments of LE500 (US\$85)—significantly less than a full month’s wage.

Between 2008 and 2010, workers held protests to win back the full bonus payments, the equivalent of four months wages in seasonal bonuses paid throughout the year. Since the start of 2011 the company has stopped paying holiday bonuses.

“Employees are also demanding the removal of the human resource director at their factory, who they hold responsible for laying off 120 employees since February,” said *Ahram Online*.

El Sewedy Electric is the leading integrated cables and electrical products maker in the Middle East and according to *Ahram Online* “the firm posted quarter-on-quarter growth of 11 percent in revenue and 19 percent in pre-tax earnings for the second quarter of 2011.

“According to figures published on Egypt’s stock exchange web site, El Sewedy profits grew 29 percent between 2009 and 2010 to reach LE816.6 million [US\$136.8 million].”

### **Call for general strike over Israeli contract workers**

Histadrut, the General Federation of Labour in Israel, has renewed its threat to call a general strike over contract workers, after what its calls Ministry of Finance “backtracking” in negotiations, according to *Globes online*, October 30.

According to Histadrut sources, last month, the ministry had agreed in principle to hire some contract workers by the public sector, including cleaners, but then reversed this decision and said instead that it would only “improve their terms.”

### **Turkish Cypriots protest against changes to social security, social insurance, raising of retirement age**

*Hürriyet Daily News* reported October 31 that thousands of Turkish Cypriots protested in front of the General Assembly in Nicosia the day before, prior to discussions on legislation for economic reforms in the northern part of the island.

The demonstration was against a reform that aims to change existing

legislation on social security and social insurance and to raise the retirement age to 60 from 50 years.

### **Namibian gold contractors strike**

Around 200 workers working for Lewcor Plant Hire went on strike Monday. Among their grievances were non-payment of promised pay increases, excessive taxation and no medical or housing allowances. They also alleged breaches of safety regulations.

The Lewcor workers are contracted to Navachab Gold Mine near Karibib to clear rock from the site.

### **Namibia: Engen fuel workers strike**

Workers at Engen fuel distribution depot were set to begin strike action Wednesday in pursuit of an 8 percent pay increase. The workers rejected the company offer of 5.5 percent. They were seeking payment of housing and transport allowances.

The Miners Union of Namibia had been involved with three separate rounds of negotiations with Engen management, but the company had not improved its offer. Engen is a major petroleum products supplier across the whole of southern Africa.

### **Nigerian local government workers strike**

Local government across Kogi state was paralysed this week when workers belonging to the Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) went on strike. All 21 council secretariats across the state were affected.

The workers are seeking relativity pay increases.

### **Nigerian weather forecasters set to strike**

A strike by 1,500 workers at the Nigeria Meteorological Agency (NIMET) was due to begin Tuesday. NIMET is a government agency and the workers are members of the Amalgamated Union of Public Corporations, Civil Service Technical and Recreational Services Employees (AUPCTRE). They provide weather forecasts to ships, airlines, oil rigs and agricultural bodies.

Their main grievance is the non-implementation of a relativity salary increase that had been paid to other civil service staff, but not NIMET staff.

### **Nigerian laboratory staff work to rule**

Laboratory staff belonging to the Association of Medical Laboratory Scientists of Nigeria (AMLSN) began a five-day work to rule on Monday.

The action is in pursuit of a job demarcation dispute. The lab workers allege pathology staff are undertaking work that should be done by medical laboratory scientists. The Nigerian Union of Health Professionals (NUHEP) has said it will mobilise other sections of health workers if the government does not address the lab staffs' concerns.

### **Kenyan power workers strike on hold**

Around 12,000 workers belonging to the Kenya Electrical Trades and Allied Workers Union (KETAWU) at Kenya Power were due to go on strike Monday. Their action was expected to deprive most of the country of power.

However, the strike has been put on hold while the union holds discussions with management. The workers' demands include a 13 percent pay increase, while management are offering 7 percent and a review of salaries. Around two thirds of the workers are only employed on a casual basis and are seeking to be made permanent and thus become eligible for benefits and overtime payments.

### **Kenya airport workers undertake go-slow action**

Workers in the Aviation and Allied Workers Union (AAWU) working for the Kenya Civil Aviation Authority (KCAA) began go-slow action this week. The action is being taken by KCAA workers at Nairobi and Mombasa airports. KCAA staff are responsible for aircraft movements on the ground and air traffic control.

Among the workers' grievances are no pay increases, lack of promotion and overwork.

### **South Africa: Striking casino staff threaten secondary action**

Around 600 casino staff working for Montecasino have been on strike for two weeks in pursuit of an improved pay offer. The company have offered 6 percent. The workers are members of the Future of South African Workers Union (FSAWU).

The workers are now threatening secondary action in response to threats by management to replace strikers with scabs from other provinces. The union is alleging that management is planning to use partially trained staff, without gaming licences, to operate on the gambling floor.



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