

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

2 December 2011

## Bulgarian rail workers strike

On November 24, rail workers on the Bulgarian State Railways (BDZ) began industrial action against the laying off of around 2,000 workers, supposedly to combat accumulated corporate debt.

“The strike that has disrupted Bulgarian state railways’ BDZ’s services is set to continue on November 27 and beyond, with no sign of a resolution in sight and with losses mounting into hundreds of thousands of lev,” reported the *Sofia Echo*.

According to BDZ, on November 26 about 181 out of 263 trains were halted due to the strike. Also on that day, Bulgarian news agency BTA reported that not a single train left the Central Station in Sofia, Pernik, the Mezdra and Gorna Oryahovitsa junctions, Plovdiv or Bourgas. Freight trains did not pass through Plovdiv or Toulovo junction.

Novinite.com reported that the strike had continued to block over 80 percent of the country’s trains. Reports also circulated that some of those on strike had threatened a hunger strike.

The strike continued in the teeth of a statement by BDZ CEO Yordan Nedev that the strike would bankrupt the railway operator, and the remarks of BDZ board chairman Vladimir Vladimirov that management may more than double the intended layoffs to 5,000.

## Bulgarian workers oppose pension changes, spending cuts in Sofia

On November 30, thousands marched in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, and blocked traffic to oppose

government spending cuts and a decision to raise the retirement age.

“Prime Minister Boiko Borissov reduced farm aid, cut services and workers from the state railways and raised the retirement age one year from 2012, instead of 2021 under a pension changes started last year, to contain the impact of the euro area’s sovereign-debt crisis,” reported *BusinessWeek*.

Protesters carried an effigy of Finance Minister Simeon Djankov, demanding his resignation.

“Bulgaria, the European Union’s poorest country in terms of economic output per capita, weathered the global crisis without borrowing from international lenders. The country aims to narrow this year’s budget gap to 2 percent of gross domestic product and 1.35 percent in 2012,” the magazine reported.

If the government’s pension proposals are passed, around 18,000 workers will not be able to retire next year as they had planned. Labour Minister Totyu Mladenov claims these changes will help cut the 2 billion lev (\$1.4 billion) deficit in the state pension fund by 28 million lev in 2012 and 121 million lev in 2013.

“Reforms in the pensions system and the railways have been delayed by more than a decade,” Djankov told reporters.

Hundreds of farmers throughout the countryside carried out a third day of protests as they blocked main highways for several hours to oppose government cuts in subsidies by 230 million lev next year.

## Protest against austerity measures in Dublin

Thousands took to the streets of the capital, Dublin,

November 27 to protest against austerity measures.

“Organisers called on the government to reverse its policy of austerity ahead of what is expected to be another tough budget next month,” reported RTÉ.

### **Strike over collective agreement at Turkish steel giant**

The country’s largest steelmaking group, Ereğli Demir ve Çelik Fabrikalari TAS, has announced a strike at the Erdemir steel service centre subsidiary, according to *Steel Guru*.

Negotiations between ERSEM and the Turkish Metal Union over a collective labour agreement are ongoing.

Based in Gebze, ERSEM is a steel service centre with an annual capacity of 200,000 tonnes providing cutting and slitting services for hot rolled coils, cold rolled coils and coated metal products.

### **Namibian building workers locked out**

Building workers employed in the construction of a new maternity ward at Oshatiki State hospital have been locked out by the Chinese company China Jiangxi International. They had demanded the company pay the legal minimum wage as laid down in the Labour Act.

### **Nigerian university workers threaten nationwide strike action**

University workers represented by the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities, the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities and the National Association of Academic Technologists have threatened a nationwide strike.

The three unions are demanding the government implement a 2009 agreement that included a retirement age of 65, improved staff welfare and increased

university funding.

The unions wrote to the minister of education demanding the government implement the agreement by November 30.

### **Kenyan nurses pledge to join planned doctor’s strike**

Doctors organised by the Kenya Union of Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists are set to strike on December 5 in pursuit of salary increases. The union says Kenyan doctors are among the lowest paid in Africa.

Nurses are now planning to join the strike in pursuit of a substantial salary increase. They are also demanding 7,000 nurses currently on temporary contracts be given permanent pensionable positions. They want the government to recruit more nurses.

Currently there are around 17,000 nurses employed in Kenya, which means each nurse has to look after 60 patients a day. The nurses union, Medical Professional and Allied Staff, says the World Health Organisation’s recommendation is that one nurse should only be tasked with care for six patients a day.



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