

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

16 December 2011

## Italian workers strike against austerity measures

A series of strikes took place this week against the €33 billion austerity package being implemented by the unelected technocrat government of Prime Minister Mario Monti. Unions confined most protests to a token three hours.

Reuters reported that port, highway, and haulage personnel stopped work for three hours and metal workers, including those at carmaker Fiat, stopped work for eight hours. Printing press operators stopped for a full shift and most newspapers did not publish on Tuesday.

Public transport strikes are to continue throughout the week. Bank employees are to strike for the afternoon of December 16, and the public administration will close down for a whole day on December 19.

Metalworkers, typographers and staff at La Scala opera were among those taking part in rallies against the austerity measures.

## UK workers at Unilever in first national strike against attack on pensions

Workers at consumer goods conglomerate Unilever went on a 24-hour strike over plans to end the company's final salary pension scheme and proposals that will cut retirement income by up to 40 percent.

It was the first national strike at the company.

Over 2,500 workers took industrial action at 11 sites in Gloucester, Port Sunlight, Purfleet, Norwich, Leeds, Manchester, Bedford, Burton-on-Trent, Crumlin, Deeside and Warrington.

Spokesmen for the three unions involved—Unite, Usdaw and the GMB—said the strike would hit production of many of Unilever's household brands, including Dove, Marmite, PG Tips, Pot Noodle and Hellman's Mayonnaise.

## Pharmacist strike in Greece

Pharmacies in the Greek cities of Athens and Piraeus closed Wednesday during a 24-hour strike called by the Panhellenic Pharmacists Association (PFS). The pharmacists are protesting the fact that the government is moving to settle its debts with pharmaceutical companies but not taking any measures to ensure that social insurance funds can pay for their members' prescriptions.

This could lead to a situation whereby pharmacists do not issue prescription medicines to customers unless they pay in cash. The dispute is set to escalate in January due to a national suspension of credit to all

social security funds as of January 1, 2012 or earlier.

The Pharmacists Association described what is taking place as the "downgrading of pharmaceutical care" and the "economic asphyxiation" of pharmacies. The association is also opposing government plans to open up the profession to greater competition. As part of its austerity programme, the technocratic government of Lucas Papademos is seeking to relax licensing laws in a many professions in order to open them up to private competition.

## Greek state broadcasting employees strike

State broadcasting employees in Greece began three days of rolling 24-hour strikes Tuesday. The workers, employed in the public TV and radio, ERT, municipal radio stations and the Athens News Agency, are opposing changes their social security schemes and the inclusion of co-workers in the labour reserve scheme. Under this scheme legislated under the previous social democratic PASOK government, tens of thousands of workers will be suspended from their jobs and forced to take a 40 percent wage cut as a precursor to their inevitable firing.

During the action state TV output will be halted and the Athens News Agency and the ANA-MPA web sites will not be updated.

The striking workers were set to demonstrate outside parliament Thursday as MPs debate a bill to slash public spending on state broadcasting. The government's measures will lead to the closure of some national TV stations and many regional radio stations.

## Possible strikes at GE UK sites over pension changes

Industrial action at the General Electric Company (GE), the world's largest aircraft engine manufacturer, is "now almost inevitable" over pension changes introduced by the company, according to a December 14 statement on the Unite union web site.

Recent talks failed over the closure of GE's final salary scheme to new entrants and the almost doubling of member contributions.

GE amassed \$14.2 billion in profits last year and awarded its top five executives \$10 million in salaries and \$24.5 million in pension payments.

## Protest against turning Birmingham school into academy

Teachers and parents staged a protest against turning a Birmingham

primary school into an academy December 12, and gave an undertaking to mount a rolling programme of industrial action.

An academy school is a state funded, but privately run institution that is outside of nominal local authority control—allowing its managers free rein on setting staff pay and conditions, the teaching curriculum and pupil exclusion rates.

Over 60 people took part in the demonstration outside Montgomery Primary School in Sparkbrook, before marching to a nearby community hall for an impromptu meeting to organise a petition and further action, according to the *Birmingham Post*. The school was closed.

Teachers, who have said their concerns are being ignored, are against proposals for the school to become an academy. Parents said they are angry at the lack of consultation and said they fully support the action by the teachers.

### **Spain: Iberia pilots set for strikes**

*Travel Weekly* reported December 8, “Iberia pilots are due to take strike action this month over plans by parent company International Airlines Group to set up a Spanish budget carrier.”

Pilots fear job losses and say the hiring of new staff at Iberia Express will be on much lower pay.

The walkouts have been called for December 18 and 29.

Iberia Express is due to be launched in April 2012 with Iberia deploying 40 aircraft to the low-cost start-up.

A vote on action is to be held next week.

“The new airline being established by Iberia and British Airways owner IAG is to run short and medium range flights from Madrid, where there has been increased competition from other low-cost carriers and high speed trains,” said *Travel Weekly*.

Unions representing other Iberia workers said they are not to take part in the strike.

### **Thousands of Cypriot government workers strike over pay freeze**

Thousands of public sector workers across the island held a three-hour strike December 13 to protest a proposed two-year salary freeze.

The strike closed schools early, but did not affect airports, seaports and hospitals.

“In Nicosia, hundreds of protesters booed and mocked lawmakers entering and exiting parliament, and union leaders said they should have targeted tax dodgers and the rich, not public employees,” reported AP.

Hundreds of students also marched onto the streets of the capital alongside workers protesting against government austerity measures.

The Cypriot government is seeking to slash its fiscal deficit and restore investor confidence following credit rating downgrades due to its banks heavy exposure to debt-laden Greece, which have brought it a step above junk status.

According to AP, Cyprus, with an €18 billion (\$23.8 billion) economy, “has been largely locked out of international markets for loans to pay its bills and refinance its debt, as interest rates on its bonds have shot up as a result of the downgrades.”

The island is relying on a €2.5 billion (\$3.3 billion) loan from Russia at an interest rate much lower than what markets are offering. The loan will only suffice until around June 2012.

Among the austerity measures the government is to implement are

raising a sales tax from 15 to 17 percent, a scale-based levy on private sector salaries above €2,500 (\$3,312), reducing social benefits by €200 million (\$265 million) and reducing public sector jobs.

Legislators are to hold separate votes this week on the budget and additional austerity measures, which aim to shrink the deficit from the current 6.5 percent of gross domestic product to 2.4 percent.

### **Cypriot air traffic controllers to strike**

Air traffic controllers announced a 12-hour strike over salaries and benefits at the control towers of Larnaca and Paphos Airports. The strike is to be staged on December 15, when the House of Representatives will be voting on the government’s austerity measures.

Controllers planned to abstain from working overtime at the Nicosia Area Control Centre, according to the *Cyprus Mail*.

The strike was expected to affect all flights to and from the two airports, except the VIP, state, military, hospital, humanitarian, search and rescue, and emergency flights, and flights with technical problems.

### **Estonian teachers plan January/February pay strike**

Following the coalition government’s rejection of their wage demands, Estonian teachers are planning a nationwide strike at the end of January or the beginning of February.

In late October teachers held a demonstration in front of the parliament building, where they demanded a 20 percent pay rise.

Teachers are not satisfied with the government’s response that wage increases will only become possible after the school network is reorganized, *Postimees* reported.

### **Bahraini workers strike, protest over pay**

About 1,000 workers and 100 construction company staff went on strike December 11 “over alleged unpaid wages for the past seven months,” reported *Gulf Daily News*.

The electricians, mechanics, plumbers, labourers, masons, carpenters, engineers, foremen, technicians and managers say they will not return to work unless their demands are met, the paper said.

Workers at the Al Hamad Construction Company claim they have been working on basic salaries between BD60 and BD300 (US\$160-800).

The workers started a march to the main office in Gold City, Manama, but were stopped by police.

Workers said they were being forced to take loans from friends and family to buy basic necessities.

### **Sudanese teachers strike over non-payment of salaries**

Teachers in the Adila district of South Darfur went on strike Sunday in protest over non-payment of their salaries. Many of them are owed wages for the last nine months.

One of the teachers told local media that all schools in the Adila district had been closed as a result of the strike and that they would not return until their demands had been met.

### **Guinea Bissau: Taxi driver strike**

Taxi drivers throughout Guinea Bissau began a three-day strike on Tuesday of this week. The action affected the capital and other major cities. The strike was called by the taxi drivers' union, which has 4,000 members. The taxi drivers allege that the police extort payment from the drivers. The union claimed full support from drivers on the strike's first day.

### **Kenyan doctors vote to continue strike**

The strike by more than 2,000 doctors, members of the Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Union (KMPDU), has entered its second week. The doctors are pursuing a 300 percent pay increase. Doctors in Kenya are amongst the lowest paid on the African continent. Annual inflation, which reached 20 percent in November, has continued to rise over the last year, rapidly eroding spending power, with food and fuel being particularly hit.

The government had made concessions, offering money to settle debts, to fund training and for emergency allowance payments for doctors on call. However, the doctors voted to reject the government offer and continue the strike.

At the weekend, consultants who are also members of KMPDU said they would join the strike if the government failed to resolve the dispute by Tuesday. Consultants work in the public hospitals as well as private ones.

The government is looking to the Industrial Court, to whom it referred the dispute in an attempt to force a resolution.

### **Zambian copper miners' strike**

Miners at Luanshya's, Baluba copper mine struck last Thursday. The mine is owned by the China Non-Ferrous Metals Corp. The miners are seeking a five million Kwacha (US\$975) across-the-board pay rise as well as improved working conditions, including increased staff levels at the mine hospital. They are also demanding the resignation of the deputy chief executive, Wang Jing Jon.

There has been a growing resentment of Chinese ownership following the election of President Michael Sata Sata, who made populist criticisms of Chinese-owned companies as part of his election campaign but has since toned down such criticism. A Human Rights Watch report issued last month spoke of workers at Chinese-owned companies in Zambia as being subject to "abusive health, safety and labour conditions and long-time government indifference."

A meeting was set up for Tuesday by the deputy minister of Labour, Rayford Mbulu, at which union representatives from the Mineworkers Union of Zambia and the National Union of Miners and Allied Workers met with the mine management. However, they failed to reach agreement and the strike continues.



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