

Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

23 December 2011

Italian public sector workers strike over austerity measures

“Thousands of government workers staged strikes Monday and joined demonstrations across Italy to protest tax and pension changes that are part of the government’s austerity package,” the Associated Press reported December 19.

The strike affected hospitals (except emergency services), post offices and government offices.

The austerity package of €30 billion (\$39 billion) in new taxes and pension changes by the bankers’ government of Prime Minister Mario Monti has already been approved by the lower house of parliament and final approval by the Senate is expected today.

On December 12, an estimated 37,000 workers took part in a series of strikes against the government’s austerity measures.

Spain’s Iberia airline forced to cancel flights due to pilots’ strike

The first part of a two-day pilots’ strike was held December 18 to protest the founding of the low-cost subsidiary Iberia Express. From March 2012 is expected to offer short and medium-range flights.

Iberia—its parent company and Spain’s main airline—was forced to cancel almost 100 flights, some 32 percent of all flights scheduled.

The union, Seppla-Iberia, says that the founding of Iberia Express is illegal, “since it contradicts Article 10 of the pilots’ collective-bargaining agreement, which says that the company’s activity cannot be divided up and which establishes that operations at Madrid-Barajas Airport must be carried out by personnel (technical crew) of the airline,” according to the *Latin American Herald Tribune*.

The union says that the founding of Iberia Express will mean the eradication of 5,000 jobs.

Belgian public sector workers strike over pension austerity

A national public sector strike was held yesterday in protest at government pension reform that will move the early retirement age in the country from 55 to 58 years. The official retirement age is 65.

The industrial action involved railways workers, airport staff, public transportation drivers, school teachers, medical and postal service staff, prisons security personnel and print/broadcast media employees.

The pension age changes form part of the government’s austerity measures aimed at reducing Belgium’s public sector deficit to below the European Union official limit of 3 percent of gross domestic product next year in order to “reassure” investors that the country has its finances under control.

Ratings agencies Standard & Poor’s and Moody’s have both cut their ratings for Belgium in the past month.

Around 50,000 workers took to the streets earlier this month against the government’s austerity cuts.

Low paid Irish bank staff strike over withdrawal of bonus

Over 300 EBS staff staged a one-day strike at branches across the country December 20 over the withholding of a traditional Christmas payment known as the 13th month—worth on average €3,000.

The Unite trade union organised a ballot of the 300 staff among its membership. Of those, 84 percent participated in the strike vote, returning a 98 percent majority in favour of industrial action.

According to RTE, the Department of Finance “has vetoed the payment of what it views as a bonus, arguing that such payments are prohibited under the ban on bank bonuses.” However, the 13th month is being paid to managers.

The EBS responded that in 1992 the managers’ 13th month payment was consolidated into their basic salary. EBS has instead offered staff an interest-free loan in lieu of the Christmas payment. Staff would be liable for benefit-in-kind tax on the loan.

The staff whose payments have been withheld earn an average of €30,000 annually.

Scottish signal workers to stage three-day strike

Signal workers in Scotland are to take three days of industrial action from December 24 in a dispute over terms and conditions.

The Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union said Network Rail managers had “ripped up” longstanding arrangements under which staff were “slotted into a post when it becomes vacant,” reported the *Press Association/Guardian*.

Hungarian journalists in hunger strike over increasing state control

“One of three Hungarian journalists staging a hunger strike said he hopes their protest brings more attention—and an end—to acts of censorship and increasing government meddling in state-funded media,” the

Associated Press reported December 16.

A media law that went into effect at the beginning of the year has been criticized by international observers for enabling the centralization of the state media's news service, leading to charges that the government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orban is able to keep closer control over its content.

One of the hunger strikers, Balazs Nagy Navarro, a foreign affairs editor at Hungary's state TV, was quoted in AP as saying: "There is constant pressure from every government to try to influence public media ... but what this current group is doing is unprecedented... Stories are manipulated daily and (state television) has become a mouthpiece for the government."

Zimbabwean municipal workers strike

Municipal workers in Chitungwiza, 30 kilometres south of Harare, have gone on strike over non-payment of their wages for November and December. They blame the city clerk for financial chaos, accusing him of corruption and incompetence, and are calling for his dismissal.

Unions representing the workers won a court order instructing the council to pay their wages, but as yet they have not been paid.

The city of 300,000 has received poor levels of municipal services. A report prepared for the Residents and Ratepayers Association in September spoke of potholed roads, sewage spills and lack of water supply.

Meter readers strike in South Africa

Around 150 workers at the African Meter Reading Company have gone on strike over conditions and terms of contract. Many workers have been employed by the company for 10 years without being offered permanent contracts.

The workers, members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU), are responsible for reading water and electric meters in the Joburg and Ekurhuleni metropolitan council areas.

Kenyan truck driver strike called off

A strike by truck drivers belonging to the Long Distance Truck Drivers Association was due to begin Tuesday but was called off at the last minute, even though some workers had gone out on strike.

The workers were demanding a minimum monthly wage of Sh30,000 (\$360). Currently some drivers earn as little as Sh15,000 (\$180).

The strike was called off by the union after the Kenyan prime minister said he would set up a task force to look into their case. The union had issued the call to strike last month, asking the labour minister to intervene on their behalf. Currently more than 100 truck drivers have been sacked for their union activity.

Kenyan postal workers strike

Around 3,000 members of the Communications Workers Union, working for the Kenya Postal Corporation (PCK), went on strike this week in pursuit of a 30 percent pay increase. Inflation in Kenya is currently around 20 percent and is rapidly eroding workers' living standards.

PCK responded to the strike by dismissing hundreds of the postal workers on the basis that a court had ruled industrial action illegal. PCK said the workers have four weeks in which to appeal their dismissal.

PCK had sacked 400 postal workers earlier in the year in a restructuring exercise aimed at reducing costs.

Nigerian academics turn to students to defend education

Members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) are currently on indefinite strike demanding the government fund education to levels in an agreement signed with the government in 2009.

ASSU members at the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria organised a symposium this week to mobilise students in defence of education. One of the striking academics told the students: "If you allow this ASUU struggle to fail, it means you have destroyed your future. You can't fold your hands and allow some few people steal our money and resources as well as kill university education."

Nigerian health workers poised to strike

Several health unions under the umbrella of the Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU) were set to begin striking on Wednesday of this week for three days. They had postponed previous ultimatums to strike. JOHESU includes unions representing midwives, pharmacists and medical technicians.

They are demanding the government implement salary structures and grades as previously agreed in 2000.



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