

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

30 December 2011

## London underground train drivers' strike

Train drivers on the London Underground (LUL) subway system held a 24-hour strike December 26 in opposition to the refusal of LUL to give them extra pay and a day off for working on Boxing Day. December 26 is a public holiday across the UK.

The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) balloted 2,200 drivers on the Underground network, and they returned a 92.3 percent vote in favour of a 24-hour strike on December 26, as well as on January 16, February 3 and February 13.

The strike virtually halted the capital's subway system and severely disrupted the start of the post-Christmas sales and sporting fixtures.

A recent LUL management document, *Operational Strategy Discussion Paper* (OSDP), leaked to the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) revealed preparations for an historic assault on jobs and working conditions to facilitate widespread privatisation.

The OSDP's financial target is to save £1.8 billion, as part of the £5 billion in cuts to the London Transport budget pushed through by Conservative mayor Boris Johnson.

## Glasgow signal workers in 72-hour walkout

Around 40 signal workers at a control centre in Glasgow staged a 72-hour strike from December 24 in a dispute over career progression.

The Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union says Network Rail managers have ripped up long-standing arrangements, in place for more than 30 years, under which staff were "slotted" into a post when it became vacant.

Network Rail states that there was no recognised agreement for filling posts since railway privatisation in 1994.

## Portuguese train engineers in four-day strike

"The Portuguese Train Engineers' Union called a four-day strike over the holiday weekend, cancelling most national rail services over December 23-25 and January 1. The strike also called for an overtime boycott by engineers from December 23 through the end of January," the *Portuguese American Journal* reported December 26.

According to the union, the strike and overtime ban was called to protest "illegal disciplinary" action against engineers refusing to double as ticket collectors.

The union said the dispute also involved public sector pay cuts and tax

hikes that are part of a national austerity programme being implemented by the government.

According to the *Portuguese American Journal*, the stoppage went ahead after talks failed between the union and the state-run Comboios de Portugal (CP) railways.

On December 23, only around 20 percent of regular trains were running.

The measures confronted by the train engineers are being implemented as a consequence of the emergency €78 billion (US\$102 billion) "bailout package" negotiated earlier this year with international creditors.

## Postal workers in Birmingham, UK, hold second strike over unpaid wages

The *Birmingham Mail* reported December 24, "Christmas staff at the Royal Mail in Birmingham have held a second protest over not being paid in just 48 hours.

"Dozens of temporary workers staged a two-hour sit-in at the canteen at the city's main sorting office in Newtown when they did not get their wages.

"They were rewarded with £350 vouchers just hours later."

The Royal Mail later cited problems with the agency payroll system and apologised to staff.

Days before, around 35 workers had staged an hour-long wildcat strike at the centre when their weekly wages went unpaid.

The *Birmingham Mail* quoted agency worker Leonie Abbott, 21, from Moseley, as saying, "I got there at 2 p.m. to start my shift and said I was refusing to work because we hadn't been paid.

"Around 40 or 50 of us had a sit-in in the canteen for a couple of hours. After we went back to work, we were all given £350 vouchers."

## Iberia Express pilots in Spain hold second strike

Airline pilots in Spain held a second strike on Thursday in an ongoing dispute. Pilots are protesting the launching of the low-cost Iberia Express airline. Pilots' union Sepia states that the founding of Iberia Express will mean the eradication of 5,000 jobs.

Iberia Express cancelled 118 flights, 36 percent of those scheduled. The first strike held on December 18 resulted in the cancellation of 91 flights, 32 percent of those scheduled.

Sepia said 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.”

### **Tax officials begin 48-hour strike in Greece**

Tax officials in Greece began a two-day strike Thursday to protest the austerity measures being imposed by the unelected government of Prime Minister Lucas Papademos.

The strike was called by the POE-DOY trade union. Immediately prior to the stoppage, hundreds of Greeks queued up outside tax offices to settle last-minute issues. Many of those queuing were handing in their car licence plates, taking their vehicles off the road rather than pay the increased road tax.

### **Guards strike at Greek archaeological sites**

Guards at popular archaeological sites across Greece struck December 24 to demand overdue weekend pay.

The workers said they would stay home every weekend until the government paid out the two months of weekend wages it owes them.

Reuters reported that hundreds of tourists were barred from visiting the Acropolis in Athens. The fifth century BC temple is the most visited archaeological site in Greece.

The country has experienced a wave of industrial actions and general strikes provoked by severe austerity measures imposed by successive governments at the behest of the European Union and the International Monetary Fund.

### **Thousands demonstrate against Turkish government's health reforms**

Thousands of striking public sector workers demonstrated in Istanbul's Beyazıt Square against the government's health reforms and the lack of progress on workers' rights.

The workers are opposing moves to vastly increase the cost of health services. Demonstrators also raised the demands for the right to collective bargaining, an increase in the minimum wage, job security and the release of political prisoners.

“Demonstrators also expressed their support for the arrested journalists during the latest wave of police operations targeting the alleged pro-Kurdish KCK,” according to *BIA News Center*.

### **Bahraini Shiite workers demand reinstatement after mass dismissals**

“Dozens of Bahraini Shiite employees fired over pro-democracy protests rallied on Wednesday demanding a return to work, a day after authorities said 181 would be reinstated,” reported the AFP, December 21.

Workers gathered outside the labour ministry included doctors (some contesting sentences of 5 to 15 years), nurses, teachers, oil and aluminium workers and civil servants, according to AFP.

Many workers were either dismissed or suspended indefinitely in the wake of a brutal crackdown on a month-long protest in February and March, amid uprisings across the region.

According to Bahrain's labour union, 377 civil servants were dismissed, and 171 out of 449 suspended remained so. At the government-owned Alba aluminium company, 405 were suspended.

The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, which last month released a scathing report on government conduct during the spring crackdown, reported 1,624 complaints from people alleging they had been sacked or suspended over the protests.

Associated Press reported December 22, that the country's official news agency had announced that 79 education ministry employees who were dismissed from their jobs during protests would be reinstated by January 1.

Sacked workers gathered outside the Labour Ministry in Isa Town November 30, demanding immediate reinstatement. The protesters included sacked workers from Asry, Gulf Air, Banagas, Batelco and government ministries.

One protester, Yousuf Hussain, was quoted by the *Gulf Daily News*: “We will continue to stage our weekly protest outside the ministry until some decisions are taken by authorities to reinstate hundreds of Bahrainis.”

The General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU) registered more than 2,000 cases of workers sacked since February. Bahrain is home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet.

### **Zimbabwe: Town council trade union leaders suspended**

The leaders of local authority trade unions in the central Zimbabwean town of Redcliff were suspended after council workers marched to the town hall last Friday to confront management over non-payment of wages. They also face disciplinary action.

The council employees are owed up to 20 months of unpaid wages. The action to suspend the workers' leaders was taken by Redcliff town clerk Elizabeth Chigwagwa.

The workers won an arbitration award at the Gweru Labour Court compelling the council to pay the wages by December 31 and condemning the suspension of their leaders as an effort to silence them.

### **Trade union calls off Kenyan postal workers' strike**

A strike by around 3,000 postal workers was called off last week, after the Postal Corporation of Kenya (PCK) sacked around 550 workers who had taken part. The workers were seeking a 30 percent pay increase.

The Communication Workers Union called off the strike as part of a court agreement to get the sacked workers reinstated. The court ruling instructed PCK to reinstate the sacked workers. However, PCK has ignored the court order, imposed a 5 percent pay rise and carried out a recruitment drive to replace the sacked workers.

### **Liberia: Holiday scheme-work students demonstrate**

Students employed on a scheme to provide vacation work demonstrated

in the Liberian capital of Monrovia last week. Around 50,000 students took to the streets protesting delays in payment and underpayment. The scheme set up by the Monrovia City Council employed the students to clean up community areas in parts of the city.

The city had originally planned to take on 10,000 students and pay them \$100. However, 50,000 students eventually enrolled, and the council tried to spread out the money by reducing the amount to \$81. This, together with delays in making the payments, led to the demonstrations in the city centre.

According to press reports, the city mayor, Mary Broh, exacerbated the situation by haranguing the protesting students. Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf intervened to promise the students that they would receive their promised payments.

### **Nigerian hospital staff extend planned strike**

Health care workers across Nigeria, under the umbrella of the Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU), held a three-day strike last week to force the government to implement a salary structure agreed on in 2000.

The strike was due to finish last Friday, but health care staff at Lagos University Teaching Hospital continued the strike through the Christmas holiday period after negotiations broke down. The admission of patients was suspended.



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