

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

6 January 2012

Greek health workers and tax collectors strike to oppose job losses

Tax collectors began a 48-hour strike December 29 to oppose government tax policies and public-sector staff cuts. Days later, on January 2, doctors and pharmacists began a week of industrial action against government austerity measures, as well as job and wage cuts.

Pharmacists complain that government efforts to slash their profit margins from 18 percent to 15 percent will bankrupt many. There is already a backlog of millions of euros in unpaid state bills for medicine, medical supplies and equipment. Theodore Abatzoglou, head of the association of Greek pharmacists, told state television NET last week, “We are no longer able to operate our pharmacies....We have unpaid bills worth €400 million at a time when banks have closed access to loans.”

State hospitals were restricted to treating emergency cases up until yesterday in protest at efforts to cut public sector salaries. Doctors complain they now have to sign new contracts with a new state health organisation to supposedly streamline and improve management of the main social security funds.

The coalition of Prime Minister Lucas Papademos is slashing social welfare as part of an austerity programme driven by the demands of the European Union and International Monetary Fund.

Iberia pilots in further strikes over new low-cost carrier

Iberia pilots are to hold two more strikes on January 9 and 11 after talks stalled between the company and the union Sepila over the introduction of a new low-cost carrier.

Pilots fear that the new Iberia Express airline will cut into some of Iberia’s major routes, and will undermine their pay and conditions. Company officials have said that the new carrier is non-negotiable.

A second day of strike action, held on December 29, led Iberia to cancel 118 flights.

Rally in support of occupation at Vita Cortex plant, Ireland

On January 2, a demonstration of around 500 gathered at the Vita Cortex plant, in Cork, in support of 32 workers who occupied the

foam packing factory last month, in pursuit of redundancy payments.

“The families, friends and other supporters did a lap of honour around the building in Ballyphehane, Cork, as part of the campaign to secure proper redundancy payments for 32 workers who have been staging a sit-in at the plant since December 16,” wrote the *Irish Examiner*.

The workers at the Vita Cortex plant on Kinsale Road are seeking the €1.2 million promised in September when management announced production was being transferred from Cork to Athlone in County Westmeath.

On December 16, the workforce were handed their final notices with no sign of the compensation. They refused to leave the plant and have been in occupation ever since.

The workers subsequently rejected a management offer of €1,500 each, just €48,000 in total, to allow the company to remove valuable machinery from the plant.

Many of the workers have been with Vita Cortex for most of their working lives. In total, the 32 workers have spent an accumulated 847 years working for the company.

Hundreds protest in Cairo against corruption, for pay and contracts

Al-Masry Al-Youm reported January 1 that hundreds of staff at “public sector companies and government institutions staged a protest on Sunday in front of the temporary government headquarters in Nasr City, Cairo, to call for the ouster of corrupt leaders, permanent contracts and the payment of overdue financial entitlements.”

The protesting workers gathered in front of the General Authority for Investment, the government’s temporary headquarters, amid tight security.

The *Egypt Independent* reported, “The workers, employed at Al-Nasr Steam Boilers, Egyptian Petroleum Service Company (EPSCO), and Petroleum Trading Service Company (Petrotrade), called on the government to give them their late allowances. Workers from Al-Nasr Steam Boilers asked the government to apply a court verdict that said their company should be state-owned.”

A cabinet source, who asked not to be named, told *Al-Masry Al-Youm* that Prime Minister Kamal al-Ganzouri demanded that authorities photograph the demonstrating workers and submit the footage to prosecutors.

EPSCO workers carried banners that called upon Ganzouri to

dismiss Petroleum Minister Abdullah Ghorab and the head of the Gulf of Suez Petroleum Company, Abdel Kadir Abdallah.

Some of the EPSCO workers said they were fired due to arbitrary charges made against them. They demanded their jobs back. Petrotrade workers carried banners that read, "Return to work is a legitimate right after the revolution."

Hospital staff demonstrate to be vaccinated in Kuwait City

A demonstration took place January 2 of around 30 female staff at the entrance to Farwaniya Hospital, Kuwait City, with banners demanding, "No Work before Vaccination".

The *Arab Times* said, "In the face of the Ministry of Health denying the discovery of cases of meningitis at the Farwaniya Health Region in the media, officials are giving implicit and practical impression that cases of meningitis exist, with vaccination they are giving to doctors and technicians in the Farwaniya Hospital."

The protesting workers, the paper said, "complained the hospital management was careless in handling the first patient infected with meningitis from a popular shopping mall in Rai Road on Dec 19, and that there were six other cases at the Internal Medicine Department, including children."

Zambian copper miners' strike

Miners at the Kansanshi mine, near the copper belt town of Chingola, went on strike on Tuesday, demanding a 100 percent pay increase. The wildcat action took place as management was in negotiations with the union.

Kansanshi is a subsidiary of the Canadian-owned First Quantum mining company. The mine is Zambia's largest copper mine, producing nearly a quarter of a million tonnes in 2010. Kansanshi spokesman Godfrey Msiska denounced the strike as illegal.

Senegalese transport strike

Bus and taxi drivers across Senegal took part in a nationwide two-day strike this week. The strike had a big impact in the capital, Dakar, where people had to resort to horse-drawn carts to get around.

The drivers are members of the National Union of Road Transport Workers. They were protesting the high cost of fuel and insurance and also police harassment. According to the union, the strike had almost unanimous support from workers across the country.

Nigerian unions plan strike to oppose cut in fuel subsidy

The leaderships of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the

Trade Union Congress (TUC) have set Wednesday January 11 for a national general strike to oppose the government's dropping of the fuel subsidy.

The subsidy applied to petroleum products used in transport and by many Nigerians to run home generators. Although Nigeria is a major oil producer, it has no refinery facilities and has to import refined fuel products.

According to press reports, the removal of the subsidy has led to fuel prices doubling in some parts of the country. This will have a major deleterious impact on most of the population, pushing them further into poverty.

Dismissed Kenya Post workers reinstated

Six hundred dismissed postal workers employed by Kenya Post Corporation (KPC) returned to work on January 4. The workers, members of the Communications Workers Union (CWU), had been dismissed when they went out on strike December 16 demanding a 30 percent pay rise.

On December 29, the Industrial Court ruled that the sackings were illegal and ordered the postal workers reinstated. On the same date, the union called off the strike.

The same court order reinstating the workers also restrained them from taking further action in support of the pay increase. The court also imposed binding arbitration.

Kenyan civil servants give notice of strike

More than 200,000 civil servants, members of the Union of Kenya Civil Servants, have threatened to go on strike next week. They are calling on the government to implement a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) signed four years ago. The union is seeking a review of medical and housing allowances and a new employment agreement for casual workers.



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