

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

13 January 2012

UK Unilever workers to stage more strikes over pensions

Thousands of workers employed by consumer goods conglomerate Unilever Plc are to stage a series of strikes, from next week, in an escalation of a dispute over plans to axe their final salary pension scheme.

“Last month, union members staged a one-day stoppage, the first strike in Britain in the group’s 81-year history, and a rare walkout over pensions at a UK blue-chip company,” Reuters reported.

Unilever makes many household brands, such as Persil washing powder, PG Tips tea bags and Flora margarine. It employs around 7,000 workers at 12 plants in Britain. It is looking to move all 5,000 members promised final salary pensions to a career average scheme by July 2012. This could see the retirement income of thousands of workers cut by between 20 and 40 percent.

The company abandoned final salary pensions for new joiners in 2008 and 2,000 workers are already on the less generous scheme. The Unilever UK pension scheme has a deficit of about £680 million (\$1.05 billion).

UK doctors could strike over pension reform

Doctors in the North East of the country could go on strike for the first time in more than 30 years if the dispute over public sector pensions is not resolved.

Around 300 doctors are to gather in Newcastle next week to discuss the Government’s final offer on pensions.

The Journal said, “The [British Medical Association] BMA said that even though improvements had been made to the original offer, doctors would still be ‘hit hard’, with those at the start of their careers facing the prospect of paying more than £200,000 in additional lifetime contributions.”

Many doctors would have to work until they were 68 before being able to draw a full pension. The amount deducted from their pay will go up from April, with further rises in 2013 and 2014.

German hospital doctors strike over pay and conditions

50,000 doctors are to take industrial action in 600 hospitals across the country at the end of the month, following a vote 92.7 percent in favour of a strike, reported the *Local*, January 10.

The health workers are demanding a 6 percent wage increase, better payment for on-call shifts and a reduction of these shifts to no more than four per doctor per month.

Marburger Bund union leader Rudolf Henke said 55 percent of doctors working in municipal hospitals take on between five and nine such on-call shifts each month. Hospitals had seen profits increase by 4.2 percent during the first three quarters of last year, he said.

Talks between the Marburger Bund and the association representing municipal employers, the VKA, broke down in December over an offer of a gradual wage increase of 1.48 percent over 16 months and a one-off payment of €250.

Greek museums, sites to close for three-day strike over unpaid wages

Guards and site staff are to stage a three-day strike over unpaid weekend wages, forcing museums and archaeological sites across the country to close today and reopen on Monday morning.

Greek doctors continue action against spending cuts

Doctors working in the Social Service Institute, IKA—the largest social security organisation in Greece—and in private practices took a further five days of industrial action this week, January 9 to January 13, against health spending cuts.

The rolling 24-hour strikes are to “secure the work, insurances and wages of doctors working with the EOPYY (Common Distributor of Health Services),” said the *Greek Reporter*, January 7.

Pharmacists are also to continue their stoppages against government austerity measures and reforms.

Hospital workers plan action over staffing, County Mayo, Ireland

“Notice of industrial action by some 80 support workers at a County Mayo hospital was issued to the Health Service Executive yesterday over outsourcing and short-staffing,” reported the *Irish Times*, January 7.

The action involves cleaners and caterers, at Mayo General Hospital, Castlebar, and is due to begin January 23.

The dispute began with a proposal by management to outsource the cleaning work of retiring staff to private contractors.

Sacked Irish lingerie shop workers occupy Dublin store

Staff from the lingerie chain La Senza staged a sit-in at its Liffey Valley store January 9, in a dispute over unpaid overtime.

The workers, who found out just hours before that they had lost their jobs, say they are owed overtime payments for December.

The morning after the sit-in began by the predominantly female staff, colleagues from the Grafton Street, Henry Street and Dundrum branches joined the occupation.

The lingerie chain had 15 shops in Ireland and employed around 100 people.

60 La Senza shops in the UK, which were threatened with closure, will remain open after a rescue deal was struck. The *Irish Times* said, "The chain went into administration yesterday threatening 1,300 redundancies across over 100 outlets in Britain and the Republic. It operated eight stores in the State including a number of concessions in Debenhams department stores.

"Some of its employees, most of whom are women, were told they were being made redundant last night. Some were told as they turned up for work this morning."

Evelyn Gaynor, former worker at Liffey Valley, said staff had not been issued P45s. "We haven't even got documents to go and claim social welfare. We have been left with no documents, nothing."

Portuguese port workers start five-day strike over job security

Port workers started a five-day strike January 9. The workers want the government to ensure the port handling company in the northern port of Aveiro not go bankrupt and that staff there do not lose their jobs.

According to Reuters, the action affected most of the country's ports, including Lisbon, with only minimum services maintained.

Belmar da Costa, head of the Naval Shipping Agents Association, said the strike is likely to prevent 80 to 100 ships from docking at the ports whose workers are on strike during the whole week.

Bulgarian coal miners stage one-hour warning strike

Miners at the country's largest coal mining company, state-owned Maritza East Mines, staged a one-hour warning strike January 10 to demand a wage increase, according to an AFP report: "Workers stopped coal ore production and shipments to the four electric power plants supplied by the company between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m., even if they remained at their jobs. They threatened to launch an effective strike Saturday if the company management failed to meet demands for raising salaries in accordance with increased coal production at the three mines operated by Maritza East Mines."

Around 95 percent of all workers at the three mines and the company administration had joined the strike, according to union sources. The state-owned company supplies 90 percent of all lignite coal used for electricity production in Bulgaria.

Cyprus Air traffic controllers announce strike

On January 10, air traffic controllers in Cyprus announced two four-hour strikes later this month that will affect all flights to and from the island in their efforts to oppose government austerity measures.

The controllers, who have been enforcing a work-to-rule since January 5, say their income comes from the airlines using the island's airspace and does not affect the state budget.

The four-hour strike will take place at the control towers of Larnaca and Paphos airports on January 18 and 25, both Wednesdays, the busiest days of the week.

"Controllers oppose a raft of measures imposed on all state and broader state sector workers; a two-year staggered contribution, a permanent contribution towards their pension and a two-year freeze in salaries—including pay scale rises and CoLA," said *Cyprus-Mail*.

Israeli rail strike over outsourcing of maintenance work

A weeklong strike by rail workers over outsourcing of maintenance work on new rolling stock has disrupted rail services on the lines between the Harishonim station in Rishon LeZion and Tel Aviv, and from Jerusalem's Malha station to Tel Aviv.

Globes reported, "Canadian company Bombardier has in effect been assured of the maintenance work as part of a contract for the supply of new passenger cars. The Histadrut [union federation] claims that this is not only a form of privatization, which will adversely affect Israel Railways workers, but also a waste of money, as Bombardier will have to construct new maintenance sheds."

Israeli nurses abandon wards, protesting overcrowding

Nurses at Sheba Medical Centre in Tel Hashomer walked out of three internal departments January 9 in protest at overcrowding.

"The nurses were protesting the fact that the occupancy of the wards reached 140 percent. According to an agreement between the Nurses' Association and the state, the occupancy in the internal departments will not rise above 115 percent," said the *Jerusalem Post*.

Each of the abandoned wards had 50 patients, even though regulations state that only 36 patients are allowed in each ward.

Egypt subway workers in sit-in for permanent contracts

On January 9, subway train employees staged a sit-in call for permanent contracts among other reforms.

Ahram Online said, "According to media reports, the protest caused traffic congestion in downtown, Cairo as the demonstrators called for permanent contracts and against overdue payments."

Zimbabwe gold miners' strike

Miners at the Canadian-listed New Dawn Mining Corporation Turk and Angelus mines in the greenstone belt, north of Bulawayo, have gone on strike. Press reports give no details as to why the miners have taken action. The mines in geologically rich seams are highly lucrative.

Zimbabwe airline workers continue strike

The strike by workers at Air Zimbabwe continues in spite of some workers returning to work last Thursday. The workers are striking over non-payment of salaries going back eight months.

One striker told the press, "We have gone for eight months without pay but promises only. What can make use believe that this time around we are going to get our money."

Around 100 Airline workers demonstrated outside the airline's offices at Harare airport in pursuit of their claim.

Zimbabwe union leaders sacked

Six union representatives of municipal workers in the central Zimbabwean city of Gweru have been sacked. They include leaders of the Zimbabwe Urban Council Workers Union and the Water and Allied Workers Union.

The sackings followed strike action by municipal workers last December protesting non-payment of their November salary and alleging corruption by the municipal authority. The sackings follow the suspension of 40 workers last month.

Libyan port workers strike

The New Year saw a strike of port workers in Tripoli. They were protesting the prevailing bad working conditions. Years of neglect of the port's infrastructure has contributed to their poor conditions. One worker with 15 years' service explained, "We want the company to take care of the port ... we want a place to escape from the cold and the heat."

Around 300 of the port workers held a demonstration at the port gates in support of their demands.

Zambia postal workers stage wildcat strike

Last Friday postal workers working for Zambia Postal Services, in the capital Lusaka took wildcat strike action in support of a 100 percent pay increase. Postal workers from various post offices within Lusaka held a demonstration outside the Main Post Office where they chanted anti-management slogans.

The president of the National Union of Communication Workers, Patrick Kaonga, tried in vain to get the workers to return to work. Later a spokesman for the striking workers said they no longer wanted to be

represented by Kaonga and his team.

Postal workers in Kitwe began a go-slow protest against bad working conditions.

Liberian students take solidarity action in support of lecturers

Students at the African Methodist Episcopal University (AMEU) in the Liberian capital of Monrovia held street demonstrations in the capital last Friday in support of their lecturers at AMEU, setting up roadblocks and burning tyres.

The lecturers began their action at the beginning of December, boycotting classes and all academic activities over AMEU's failure to address the lecturers concerns, they are also seeking a doubling of their salaries.

South Africa: Strike by tollgate workers set to spread

Tollgate operators in KwaZulu-Natal province went on strike last Saturday in support of a basic monthly salary of R3500 (\$430). Currently toll workers earn around R2500 (\$310) a month. They are also seeking an increased housing allowance.

The workers are employed by Tolcon Lehumo, and are represented by the SA Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU). The union has said it will call out its members working on tollgate in Gauteng, Western Cape and Free State if the company does not come to the negotiating table by Friday.

The union has approached the government Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration service (CCMA) asking them to become involved in the negotiations.

Ghanaian TUC calls on government to restore fuel subsidy

The Ghanaian Trades Union Congress has called on the Ghanaian government to restore its subsidy on fuel. At the end of December, the National Petroleum Authority announced hefty price increases following the government's decision to stop the subsidy.



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