

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

20 January 2012

Anti-austerity protest and strike in Athens

Thousands of workers marched on the parliament in Athens on January 17 to protest against the government's imposition of further austerity measures.

The protest coincided with the latest visit to the capital by a team of officials from the troika (the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank) in ongoing efforts to foist the cost of bailing out the banks onto the working class in the form of crippling spending cuts, job losses, wage cuts, as well as reductions in pensions and the overturning of other social rights.

The latest demands of the troika are that the moves made against public sector employees must now be replicated throughout the private sector.

A 24-hour strike halted the Athens metro, no ferries left from the country's main ports and only partial bus service operated. Hospitals were run by essential staff while workers in the media and legal sectors also joined the strike. No television and radio news was broadcast and the publication of print media was suspended.

Reuters pointed out, "Greece has entered its fifth consecutive year of austerity-fuelled recession, with unemployment reaching a record high of 17.7 percent in the third quarter of 2011."

London rail workers ballot over industrial action

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) confirmed Wednesday that it had begun balloting for strike action and "action short of a strike" on the Heathrow Express line over the "unfair dismissal of a driver member and over a campaign of harassment and victimization against an RMT representative."

The RMT statement said that union rep Liaqat Ali had been "subjected to a barrage of unfounded, spurious and discriminatory allegations by management" and that "he is being targeted due to his trade union activities."

UK oil tanker drivers in seven-day stoppage over pay and conditions

Over 100 oil tanker drivers, working for road haulage firm Wincanton on the ConocoPhillips contract, are to start a week-long series of work stoppages from January 24 to January 31, over the company's refusal to stop attacks on pay and conditions.

The seven days of action were agreed following a "yes" vote in which 83 percent of workers backed the call to strike on a 96 percent turnout,

according to the Unite union.

The Wincanton oil tanker drivers operate from three of the UK's major fuel distribution depots at Immingham, Kingsbury and Stockton-on-Tees delivering fuel to jet forecourts around the country.

ConocoPhillips has been pursuing a draconian cost-cutting agenda in the recent period that has provoked the present dispute.

The seven-day stoppage is expected to impact heavily on fuel supplies across the UK and in particular the Midlands and the north of the country.

Reballot of workers at UK Balfour Beatty over pay

A reballot is to take place of workers at Balfour Beatty Engineering Services (BBES) for industrial action over management attacks on staff skills and pay.

A strike would "hit some of the UK's key infrastructure projects, including power stations and Crossrail as disgruntled electricians, plumbers and heating and ventilating engineers down tools," according to the Unite union web site.

Calls for a new strike ballot follow Balfour Beatty's move to impose contractual changes on around 1,600 workers in BBES, which will see the majority of skilled workers' pay cut by a third.

The company has made it clear that if staff refuse to sign up to new inferior contracts they will sack them and replace them with agency labour.

Balfour Beatty Engineering Services, along with six other leading construction companies, intends to withdraw from five long-standing agreements and impose new semi-skilled grades with massive cuts in pay.

The recent announcement of a fresh ballot follows a previous BBES strike ballot in late November 2011, where over 80 percent of union members voted "yes" for industrial action.

The reballot follows protests by thousands of construction workers across the country over the last months.

Eighth one-day strike by South Yorkshire bus drivers over pay parity

On January 16, bus drivers employed by Stagecoach in Barnsley and Rawmarsh, South Yorkshire, held their eighth one-day strike over a demand that their pay be lifted to an hourly wage of £9, comparable to the pay of drivers in other bus companies.

The dispute has been ongoing for the past six months.

Stagecoach's latest offer of a pay rise of 5.5 percent to £9.05 was rejected by a margin of 206 to 89 on the grounds that no back pay was offered and that pay talks would be delayed until May 2013, making the

deal last for 18 months.

Last August, Stagecoach paid out a windfall of £340 million to its shareholders, of which the firm's founder Sir Brian Souter pocketed £51 million and his sister Ann Gloag £37 million.

Italian taxi drivers in wildcat strike over casualisation

Taxi drivers in Rome, Naples, Milan and other Italian cities went on strike January 13 to protest possible government plans to open up their profession to more competition.

Taxis parked near the prime minister's office and residence. Naples' most famous square, Piazza del Plebiscito, was filled with parked taxis for the second consecutive day, and travelers were stranded at Rome's Leonardo Da Vinci International Airport.

Unions called on drivers to end the unauthorized strike, saying there is already one planned for January 24.

Possible strike by crew at Spanish airline Iberia

Prensa Latina reported January 12 that "Crew members of the Spanish Airline Iberia, which witnessed four strikes of its pilots protesting the creation of a low-cost branch, will meet next week to discuss the call to stage new demonstrations."

A possible strike of crew members would take place for an indefinite time on Mondays and Fridays. It could be joined by land workers at the airline.

Spokespersons for the Workers' Commissions (CCOO) and the General Union of Workers (UGT) will vote on the strike proposal during meetings scheduled for next Tuesday and Friday. If the proposal is approved, the first strike demanding a wage increase will take place on February 3.

Cola-Cola workers protest closure of factory in Poland

Around 100 workers gathered in front of the Coca-Cola factory in Lodz on January 13 to protest the management's plans to close the factory.

The announcement of the closure came on January 5, threatening 165 workers with the loss of their jobs.

Bulgarian miners strike

Thousands of miners at the country's three largest coal mines, run by state-owned Maritza East Mines, went on a strike January 16 after failing to obtain demanded wage increases.

The workers are demanding a €500 (US\$633) cash bonus due to increased output at the mine and say management earlier promised the bonus for all 7,100 miners.

The mining company says more than 33 million tons have been mined in 2011, well above the production target of 27 million tons. It supplies 90 percent of all lignite coal used for electricity production in Bulgaria.

Four major coal-fired thermal power plants located in the Maritsa Iztok

complex, including two owned by US energy companies AES and ContourGlobal, rely completely on the mines for their output, which covers a quarter of the country's electricity demand, according to AP.

Cypriot air traffic controllers in industrial action over pay

"Air traffic controllers in Cyprus walked off the job for four hours on Wednesday to protest a two-year government worker wage freeze and other deficit-reduction measures," Associated Press reported January 18. The latest strike follows last month's package of cost cuts and tax increases, which are "intended to boost investor confidence".

The credit rating of the island nation was cut last week to junk status by the Standard & Poor's ratings agency largely due to the country's financial sector being heavily exposed to Greek debt.

Airport spokesman Adamos Aspris said the four-hour stoppage affected over 5,000 passengers on 38 flights to and from the island's two airports. Air traffic controllers staged a 12-hour strike last month to protest the measures. Another four-hour work stoppage is planned for next week.

Largely unable to borrow from international markets, Cyprus is relying on a €4.5 billion (US\$5.8 billion), low-interest Russian loan to meet its financial needs for this year.

Estonian teachers threaten strike over wage increase demand

Estonian teachers and daycare workers could stage a nationwide strike next month after the government failed to agree to a wage increase, the Baltic News Service reported, citing Sven Rondik, head of the Educational Workers' Union.

An agreement between the sides, with the help of the public conciliator, is unlikely, Rondik was quoted as saying.

ERR News (Estonian Public Broadcasting) cited the union saying a poll for industrial action showed around 70 percent support for a 20 percent wage increase.

Kindergarten teachers are also expected to take part in the planned strike.

Strikes stop trains in Egypt

"The Egyptian Railway Authority stopped all Delta-Cairo-Alexandria trains in Kafr al-Dawar train station Wednesday due to worker strikes that continued for a second consecutive day," said the *Egypt Independent* on January 11.

Protests blocking railway lines have "become common since the 25 January uprising. People see such actions as the only way to force authorities to meet their demands," it reported.

Last month, an official study conducted by Egyptian National Railways, cited by the *Independent*, stated that protesters have blocked railways during 388 protests and 51 sit-ins.

Ahram Online explained, "The workers are demanding that the government re-nationalise the company per the orders of former prime minister, Essam Sharaf. They are also demanding that El Behaira Holding Company pay them their salaries from last month."

Tunisian workers hold general strike in support of hunger strikers

A general strike took place Tuesday in the southwestern city of Redyef in support of a hunger strike begun on January 9 by agricultural workers. The action is to demand official employment registration, better pay and to oppose the levels of corruption in the Regional Commissary for Agriculture.

The workers began their strike stating the government had ignored the pleas of the hunger strikers.

Tunisia: Planned strike of agency workers

The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) has called for a one-day strike to protest the continued use of agency workers. Agency workers are employed by Telecom, hospitals and the postal service, amongst others. The UGTT says 35,000 workers are due to come out on strike.

The UGTT says the government has failed to honour a deal agreed in April last year to phase out the use of such workers who do not have the same benefits as permanent employees.

South African teachers prepare strike over forced redeployment

Members of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), in the Eastern Cape, have been holding protests prior to a proposed province-wide strike. The protests are directed against provincial head of department for education, Modidima Manny. They are protesting the dismissal of temporary teachers and the forced redeployment of other teachers.

Teachers in Uitenhage picketed the education district office opposing the redeployment of teachers. Thanduxolo High School, which currently has 21 teachers, is slated to have 11 teachers redeployed to other schools in the province. Molly Blackburn High School has lost five temporary teachers.

Zimbabwean public sector workers set to strike

Public sector workers, including teachers, were due to hold a one-day strike this week in their ongoing campaign for a minimum wage of \$538 for all government employees. The leadership of the various public sector unions under the umbrella of the Apex Council was due to meet with Public Sector minister Lucia Matibenga on Tuesday, but she failed to show.

Kenyan cement workers clash with police

Around a 1,000 workers at the East African Portland Cement Company clashed with police last week. The police were accompanying the company's suspended managing director, Kephah Tande, who tried to serve a court order on the company calling for his reinstatement.

The workers, who oppose Tande's reinstatement, were met with teargas from the police accompanying Tande. One of the workers received an arm wound when one of the company's security staff grabbed a police rifle and opened fire on the workers.



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