

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

10 February 2012

## Air France staff in four-day strike to protest strike bill

Pilots, cabin crew and ground workers at Air France SA took industrial action from Monday, February 6, to Thursday, February 9, in protest at a bill before the French Senate that will oblige each worker seeking to strike to give 48 hours' notice.

The bill passed the National Assembly (lower house of parliament), in January.

According to Reuters, the bill is intended to give airlines enough time to prepare for strikes and set up a skeleton service for travellers.

Hundreds of Air France flights were cancelled with the national carrier saying it could only guarantee that it would fly 60 percent of its long-distance schedule.

Before Christmas, during the busy flight period, the government deployed police at airports when private security staff held an 11th-hour, 11-day strike.

## Reuters London staff vote to strike over pay offer

Journalists at Thomson Reuters voted overwhelmingly last week to strike over a below-inflation pay offer. It is the first industrial action at the news agency for over 25 years.

The 48-hour strike, which began Thursday, was set to coincide with the release of Thomson Reuters' full-year financial results.

In a situation where journalists are struggling to cope with the cost of living in London, management have made the below-inflation pay offer of 1.75 percent, following years of effective pay cuts.

A ballot for industrial action saw 83 percent of National Union of Journalist (NUJ) members at Thomson Reuters vote in favour of a strike.

The NUJ also said that Thomson Reuters was "under fire" over its treatment of cleaning staff at its Canary Wharf premises. Campaigners have claimed that workers face "intimidation from the cleaning contractor Lancaster/Initial."

The last threat of possible industrial action at the news agency was made in 2008 and 2009 over jobs cuts following the merger of Reuters and Thomson.

## Staff at Galway Airport stage sit-in over redundancy payments

"Staff at Galway Airport are staging a sit-in protest until they receive assurances they will be paid their statutory redundancy entitlements," reported the *Irish Times* on February 7.

Most of the airport's workforce were dismissed in December following Aer Arann's decision to withdraw its flights for the winter. Since Christmas, around 14 workers have been operating the airport, which continues to be used by a number of private aircraft.

Last month, the Bank of Ireland withdrew €1.1 million from the bank account of the company that operates the airport to set it off against the company's loans. The company subsequently informed the remaining employees it could no longer guarantee they would be paid the minimum statutory redundancy when the company folds.

## Public transport workers in 24-hour strike in Portugal

Public transport workers in Portugal have launched a 24-hour strike to protest restructuring plans that are part of the government's package of austerity measures. It is the third such strike since November.

In the capital, Lisbon, the metro shut down at midnight and ferry services were stopped during rush-hour traffic.

The government's austerity measures include the reduction of wages, cutting jobs and privatizing some of the state-owned mass transit companies. In addition, there are to be service reductions and price increases for public transport users.

According to government figures, the public transport sector's debts amount to around €17 billion, or about 10 percent of the country's annual gross domestic product.

Portugal was leased a €78 billion bailout last year, by the European Union and International Monetary Fund—in exchange for the implementation of severe austerity measures—following bailouts of Greece and Ireland in 2010.

The interest rate the government has to pay on 5-year bonds rose to more than 20 percent last week, compared with 10-year bonds that have fallen back from their 17 percent high.

## Belgian rail workers to strike

Belgian rail unions have called a strike for February 15 in protest at planned austerity measures carried out by rail operator SNCB, Reuters reports. The imminent strike would be the third such rail stoppage in three

months after a public sector strike in December and a general strike last week, in protest at the new government's austerity measures.

ACV-Transcom union official Luc Piens said last week that the strike could be averted if SNCB agreed to talk about planned measures, instead of just announcing them.

The strike could cripple the whole network, halting high-speed international services into and out of Belgium, such as the Eurostar from London, Thalys from Paris and ICE from Germany.

### **Further strike action by Stagecoach drivers in South Yorkshire, UK**

Bus drivers in Barnsley and Rawmarsh, South Yorkshire, are continuing their dispute over pay—holding further one-day strikes on February 4, 6, 8 and today.

On Saturday, a demonstration was held in Barnsley town centre to support the drivers. They have been in dispute with Stagecoach for more than six months over demands for a pay rise to £9 an hour to reach parity with drivers at other Yorkshire bus companies.

Stagecoach's previous offer of a pay rise to £9.05 was rejected by the workers because it did not include back pay and was to be in place for 18 months.

Stagecoach is trying to break the strike by drafting in drivers from other areas and using managers on strike days. It has also dropped its fare to a flat price of £1 for an adult.

Last year Stagecoach made bumper profits and in August paid out a windfall of £340 million to its shareholders, of which firm founder Sir Brian Souter pocketed £51 million and his sister, Ann Gloag, £37 million.

### **Egypt: Workers continue to protest at Sukari Gold Mine**

Labor unrest continues at the Sukari Gold Mine, located in the southeast of Egypt, some 30 kilometres away from the Red Sea City of Marsa Alam. Work stoppages, slowdown strikes, hunger strikes and protests blocking approach roads have been seen at the mine, since last January's revolutionary upheaval.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a Sukari worker told *Egypt Independent*, "We demand eight-hour work shifts instead of the 12-hour shifts that they force us to work each day."

Other demands include full-time contracts, the payment of overdue bonuses, the reinstatement of all workers who were punitively sacked, safer working conditions, health insurance and subsidized housing near the project.

### **General strike in Israel over the rights of contract workers**

A strike of half a million Israeli public and private sector workers Wednesday shut down government offices, banks and airport traffic on Wednesday. The strike centred on the rights of contract workers, according to AFP.

The stoppage, which also shut hospitals, followed the failure of talks between the Histadrut union federation and the finance ministry. The country's electricity company was also on strike, as well as the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange and major ports and rail lines. Staff at Ben Gurion

International Airport joined the stoppage for six hours and some schools were also hit by the strike.

The issue of contract workers has been ongoing for several months, with a four-hour general strike having been staged over the same dispute in November.

Contract workers can be fired without notice and receive few benefits. Workers want to see contract workers receive the same benefits as the rest of the workforce, and have called on the government to hire some of the contract workers as full employees.

### **Judicial workers strike in Malawi enters second month**

Judiciary workers in Malawi went out on strike over a month ago demanding implementation of a salary structure agreed with the government in 2006. The workers are represented by the Civil Servants Trade Union (CSTU).

This week the CSTU has threatened that if the government does not implement the agreement it will call on all civil servants to strike in support of the judiciary workers.

### **Power workers strike in Swaziland**

Workers at the Swaziland Electricity Company (SEC) went on strike after the state-owned company planned to pay no cost-of-living increase this year in spite of inflation running at nearly 8 percent. The workers are members of the Swaziland Electricity Supply Maintenance and Allied Workers Union (SESMAWU). After the initial zero increase the company came back with improved offers, still below the inflation rate, which the union rejected.

SEC threatened the striking workers with disciplinary action and on Monday the company obtained a court order demanding the workers end their strike and return to work.

### **Namibian rail strike declared illegal**

Workers belonging to the Namibia Transport and Allied Workers Union, working for TransNamib, went on a nationwide strike last week. The workers were protesting salary increases that were not applied across the board, with some workers receiving an increase but others receiving none.

The strike was costing TransNamib N\$1.5 million (\$200,000) a day in lost revenues and was affecting the wider economy. The company went to court and was given an injunction forcing the workers back to work.

### **Namibian diamond process workers in dispute**

Around 40 workers at Hard Stone Processing (HSP), members of the Mineworkers Union of Namibia, protested outside their workplace demanding a N\$450 (US\$60) salary increase together with a housing allowance of N\$400 (US\$50) and transport allowance of N\$500 (US\$70). They were also protesting that workers are appointed on a trainee basis for

six months, but after the training period they remain on a trainee salary and are not given a permanent employment contract.

### **South African bus drivers strike**

Bus drivers working for the Gautrain bus company, which operates in Gauteng Province, are taking strike action. They are demanding transport be supplied to take them to and from work. The drivers had been members of the SA Transport and Allied Workers' Union but broke from the union to mount their dispute. The drivers have ignored the company's ultimatum and a court order to return to work.

### **Platinum miners strike in South Africa continues**

The strike at Impala's platinum mine at Rustenburg continues, with production brought to a standstill. Initially around 4,000 rock drillers went out on strike objecting to a pay increase negotiated between the company and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The rock drillers had turned to the Association of Mining and Construction Union (AMCU) to represent them.

The NUM has an agreement with Impala to exclusively represent workers. Following the rock drillers strike action the company obtained a court order deeming the strike illegal. The rock drillers were fired by the company at the end of January, with the company stating they would only rehire those workers who reapplied for their jobs.

Following the rock drillers' action thousands of miners at the mine went out on strike in their support and last week the company fired 13,000 of these miners. The strike has led to the loss of 3,000 ounces of platinum production for each day of the strike. Currently platinum is fetching around \$1,650 an ounce.



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