

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

24 February 2012

## Anti-austerity general strike called for March in Portugal

A general strike is to be held in Portugal on March 22 to protest the government's attacks on employment conditions.

The action has been called by Portugal's largest union, the CGTP. There have been two previous general strikes held since the introduction of government austerity measures related to the bank bailout.

The cuts are part of a plan to meet the conditions set by the European Union and International Monetary Fund in exchange for a loan of €78 billion (\$103 billion).

The austerity package has also enabled unemployment to hit a new high of 14 percent in the final quarter of last year, and for the Portuguese economy to contract by 1.5 percent in 2011.

## Cleaners at London's St. Pancras International strike over low pay

Cleaners in charge of the Eurostar terminal in St. Pancras International have gone on strike. The cleaners, who work for Initial, part of the Rentokil Initial group, have been picketing the London station for 48 hours in protest over poverty-level pay.

The workers currently earn just £6.50 an hour and have resorted to industrial action after receiving no pay rise for four years, and no sick pay or pension scheme.

The workers say they have also been offered only a 2 percent pay rise, worth 13 pence an hour, still well below the official London living wage of £8.30 an hour.

## Merseyside workers at packaging plant in strike, lockout over redundancies

More than 140 paper packaging workers are taking industrial action over the redundancy terms of the Austrian company Mayr-Melnhof at a food packaging plant in Bootle, near Liverpool.

On February 18-19, management locked workers out of the factory. It is thought that this was so managers could move products and equipment to another plant. Workers responded to the lockout with a blockade, and demanded talks with management, which began earlier this week.

The company intended to shed 49 staff at the 180-worker site, but according to the web site of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM), "the union agreed to significant changes to terms and conditions to reduce the redundancy count to 37."

Talks, however, broke down and workers voted to strike.

Workers first took industrial action February 9 and again the following week on February 13 and 15, with weekend plant-gate demonstrations in between.

Mayr-Melnhof's Bootle plant produces packaging for a variety of items, ranging from tea bags to breakfast cereal to pet food.

## Workers at Belgian Caterpillar plant strike over possible production move

Workers at the Caterpillar plant in Gosselies, Belgium, went on strike February 17 for 24 hours "to protest against the threat of relocation of a production line manufacturing a specific part that equips the arms of excavators built in Gosselies," according to the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) web site.

The IMF went on to say that production at a sheet-cutting facility could also be shifted to Poland, a move that would affect 80 workers directly employed at the workshop.

The Caterpillar Gosselies plant employs around 4,300 workers and is one the most important facilities in the corporation's worldwide operations.

## Bahrain: 1,200 labourers from India, Bangladesh demand better wages

Some 500 Asian workers went out on strike at an Asker construction camp, demanding better wages last week. Over 500 workers at a Khamis camp and 200 others at a Salmabad camp have also started strikes separately, the *Daily Tribune* reported February 20. All three construction sites are overseen by the same company.

The labourers at the Asker camp said that they had been promised a pay rise in January. The company subsequently refused and instead some workers received lower wages than previously.

The *Daily Tribune* reported that when the workers did not appear for work, company officials came to the camp with policemen and tried to

take seven of the employees back with them to the police station. But other workers on hand prevented it and tried to air their grievances to the company officials, who rejected them.

The officials then pasted a notice, which stated that the workers had to report to duty by February 19 and those who did not “are free to leave the organisation.”

Ninety percent of labourers in the company are Indians and the rest are from Bangladesh.

### **Staff at Israeli hospital strike over working conditions**

Around 300 administrative and maintenance workers at the Poriya Hospital in Tiberias launched an open-ended strike on Monday to protest “overwork and the lack of adequate manpower slots,” that have caused the staff to “collapse under the burden”, according to the *Jerusalem Post*.

Staff say the situation has been allowed to deteriorate without management hiring additional employees.

The hospital is owned and supervised by the Health Ministry.

### **Strike at Yemeni oil company over outstanding pay**

All staff at Yemen’s recently created national oil company, Petromasila, have been on strike since February 17 over outstanding payments from its former operator, Canadian Nexen, the *Yemen Post* reports. The Canadian firm left Yemen in December.

The strike brought production to a standstill at Masila oil field—the country’s largest—which produces an estimated 160,000 barrel per day (bpd).

The French Oil Company, Total, with around 70,000 bpd, suspended operation in the Masila oil field site because of the strike.

### **Zambian miners strike**

Around 600 miners at the Chibuluma copper mine in Kalulushi walked out on Tuesday and picketed the mine entrance. The miners, members of the Mineworkers of Zambia (MUZ), had been agitating for a pay increase and improved conditions.

The mine management offered a 14 percent pay increase, but only if the miners accepted an increase of 30 minutes on their existing eight-hour day. The miners refused and walked out in protest. Management then came back with a 5 percent pay increase but no extension of the working day.

The miners are demanding mine manager Jan Throw step down, citing his insensitivity to the miners.

### **Plan to resume Air Zimbabwe flights scuppered**

The national airline Air Zimbabwe had planned to resume a limited programme of domestic flights four days a week. International, regional and domestic flights had been under suspension since January when airline workers went on strike over outstanding arrears of salaries and allowances mounting to \$35 million dating back to 2009.

However, management had to postpone the plans after pilots made it clear they would not fly the airplanes until management address the outstanding arrears.

### **South Africa: Rustenburg Impala mine dispute continues**

Two miners have died following clashes in the dispute at the Impala, Rustenburg platinum mine. Around 350 have been arrested. Rock drillers at the mine walked out a month ago protesting that retention payments were only being made to some mine workers, but excluding others. The rock drillers were then joined by 25,000 miners in sympathy. The striking miners are now demanding a salary of R9000 (\$1,165) after reductions.

The strike was declared illegal and over 17,000 miners were sacked. Impala subsequently rehired 8,000 of the dismissed miners, but they were only rehired on the basis of a reduction of benefits.

Some of the miners had been looking to the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union to support their case. Currently the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) is the only union recognised by the company. Some of the mine workers had accused the NUM of failing to represent their interests.

According to a South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) report of February 21, COSATU and the NUM are to meet with Impala management to attempt to resolve the dispute.

### **Research institute workers in Nigeria step up their action**

Workers in research institutes began a nationwide all-out strike last week demanding payment of arrears outstanding for the period July 2009 to June 2010.

Research institute workers in south-western Nigeria represented by the Joint Research and Allied Institutions Sector Union have vowed to step up their action by refusing to allow anyone to enter or leave the research institutes they are picketing in their dispute.



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