

# Workers struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

2 March 2012

## Nationwide three-hour strike in Greece

Three-hour labour stoppages were held across Greece Wednesday, organised by the private-sector GSEE and the public sector ADEDY union federations. Municipal workers occupied local town halls during the walk-out.

The action came as parliament began approving further austerity measures—agreed with the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank—in return for a second loan of 130 billion euros.

On Tuesday, the parliament approved an additional 3.2 billion euros in spending cuts. This includes cutting civil servant pensions by 12 percent, or more than 1,300 euros. Civil service pensions have already been cut by 10 percent.

Doctors held a one-day strike on Wednesday against health spending cuts. That day, parliament debated emergency measures to restructure the health service in line with the troika's demands. Health services are to be merged as part of cuts to the public health budget.

## Protests in Spain

Protests took place across Spain Wednesday in opposition to the Mariano Rajoy Conservative government's attempts to slash public spending by half this year.

The protests involved large numbers of youth. Nearly one-half of young people are officially out of work in Spain, with the figure higher in many areas.

Cuts in education budgets, the lack of jobs and prospects saw tens of thousands of high school students take to the streets in 40 towns and cities across the country.

In Valencia, scene of recent education protests that were brutally attacked by police, students gathered to denounce police violence and spending cuts.

In Madrid, thousands gathered outside the national education ministry, targeting the offices of Santander bank for a noisy protest as they marched to Puerta del Sol square.

In Barcelona, riot police were mobilised against demonstrators gathered outside the stock market, beating and arresting youth. Several took shelter from the police assault in the University of Barcelona. Students reported indiscriminate assaults and arrests, and accused police of using rubber bullets in an unprovoked attack.

A demonstration later in the day to the city's convention centre, host to a world mobile phone trade event, was prevented from reaching its goal by barriers and a mass police presence.

## Airport staff in Frankfurt end strike

A strike over pay and conditions by airfield staff at Fraport, based at Frankfurt airport, ended in the early hours of Thursday morning.

Earlier, a court had banned a threatened six-hour solidarity strike by air-traffic controllers, scheduled for Wednesday. The ruling came too late to prevent delays and cancellations at the airport—the third busiest in Europe. Lufthansa said it had cancelled 20 long-haul flights and that a further 140 flights had to be cancelled.

The GdF union said it had no plans for further action.

## FT journalists vote to strike

According to the web site of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), reporters on the *Financial Times* (FT) have voted by three-to-one to take industrial action over their 2012 pay claim which, owing to the inflation rate, is a real-terms cut.

“The management had offered a rise of 2 per cent, while retaining a third of the money set aside for this year's increase, to use as merit pay or for staff retention at the managing editor's discretion. The strike call came as the FT announced a 27 per cent profit increase at the group,” the NUJ said.

Anger among journalists on the paper was “further fuelled when it was revealed that John Ridding, FT Ltd's CEO, took home £928,000 in 2010. Figures from Companies House show that his remuneration has increased by 95 per cent in the four years to 2010. During the same period, staff were asked to accept redundancies and a one-year pay freeze,” said the NUJ.

According to figures released by Pearson, the FT's parent company, turnover was up last year by 6 percent at £427 million.

## South Yorkshire Stagecoach bus dispute ends

A six-month pay dispute between the Stagecoach transport company and bus drivers in the South Yorkshire area—Barnsley, Rotherham and the Dearne Valley—concluded earlier this month.

The bus workers began a series of strikes in November after turning down a 5.5 percent pay increase.

According to the BBC, Paul Lynch, managing director for Stagecoach in Yorkshire, said, “The deal which has ultimately been agreed is, as we always said it would be, actually worth a little less than we offered before strike action began.”

Stagecoach said it was pleased to have reached an agreement and hoped to “put this matter behind us.”

The February 20 issue of the *Doncaster Free Press* pointed out that the protracted industrial dispute has resulted in the originally imposed hourly rate of £8.74 being “increased” to £9.05 plus back pay—a rise of just 31 pence.

### **Ireland: energy company workers may strike over cuts**

“Bord Gáis is facing industrial action up to and including strikes by its entire workforce over the company’s decision to cut overtime and allowances without agreement,” reported the *Irish Examiner* February 28.

The workforce of 1,000 would be striking against the energy company’s implementation of a 7.5 percent pay cut. The company has announced its intention of saving 115 million euros over the next four years, with 34 million from wages.

The *Irish Examiner* said that a “deadline of January 1 was set for the completion of negotiations on the overtime and allowances. When that date passed without agreement another deadline was set for January 27. When that deadline was also passed the company decided to press ahead with making the cuts. It said a clause in the 2000 ‘Response’ company-union agreement meant it could do so while the matter was still to be agreed.”

### **London Underground workers to ballot for strike**

The RMT union is to ballot its members on the London Underground for strike action. It comes after the union rejected a £500 bonus for taking on additional duties during the Olympic Games in July being held in the capital.

### **Israeli airlines may strike over new “open skies” agreement**

The Histadrut (the general trade union federation) has declared a work dispute at Israel’s airlines: El Al Israel Airlines, Arkia Airlines, Israir Airlines and Tourism Ltd.

The dispute followed the signing by the Israel Airports Authority and Ministry of Transport of the “open skies” agreement without negotiating with the employees of the Israeli airlines set to be adversely affected by the decision.

With the declaration of the work dispute, a strike could follow in two weeks time. Israel’s airlines employ around 7,000 workers while a further 25,000 jobs are directly supported by the airline sector.

### **Nurses across Israel strike after talks fail**

On February 26, nurses across Israel went on a 24-hour strike, after overnight negotiations between the Finance Ministry and the chairman of the national nurses union failed to reach an agreement to prevent the

strike.

Nursing staff from Clalit Health Services community clinics, health offices, baby care clinics, schools and public hospitals across the country are participating in the strike.

According to *Ha’aretz*, “The two sides reached an understanding that the severe shortage of nurses in Israel’s health system is a matter of national priority that requires exceptional steps. In return, however, the treasury demanded that nurses agree to hospitalization of patients even when hospitals reach occupancy levels of 150 percent, and that they agree to maintain industrial peace.”

The chairperson of the national nurses union, Ilana Cohen, said this would result in patients lying in hospital corridors, and that it would endanger lives.

“They want me to allow 80 people in a ward and to commit to industrial peace,” she said. “The wards look like parking lots of beds, children are hospitalized one on top of the other, beds are in corridors and next to the toilet. It makes no sense and I will not let patients continue to get this kind of treatment. Patients are not numbers.”

### **Namibian fish process workers’ strike**

Fish process workers belonging to the Namibian Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU) employed at the Seaflower Lobster Corporation at Ludentz went on strike at the end of last week.

The workers are demanding an increase of N\$2.50 (\$0.33) an hour backdated to 2009, together with a N\$120 (\$16) housing allowance and a 5Kg box of fish. The company responded with an offer of 9.5 percent increase and a monthly housing allowance of N\$70 (\$9). Negotiations between the union and the company began in October 2010, but broke down in May 2011.

The company CEO described the strike as illegal in spite of the union been granted a certificate of unresolved issues.

### **Zimbabwean pilots strike**

Air Zimbabwe had to publicly admit strike action by its pilots had prevented the planned resumption of flights. Speaking on Friday the airline’s acting CEO Innocent Mavhunga told press: “We failed to resume flights as planned Monday as we still have challenges relating to payment of salaries... We are now grounded indefinitely.”

The airline originally had to suspend its services following action by Air Zimbabwe workers over non-payment of salaries dating back to September 2011 and announced resumption of services without reaching agreement with the workers.

Air Zimbabwe now also faces challenges from rival companies, with local airline Sol Air being granted a licence to provide internal flights and with Emirates airline providing flights five times a week between Harare, Lusaka and Dubai.

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

5,000 platinum miners at the Impala Rustenburg mine were addressed on Tuesday by former African National Congress youth leader, Julius

Malema.

Malema, currently appealing his suspension from the ANC, told the miners to return to work.

The strike, now in its sixth week, began when 5,000 rock drillers walked out after failing to receive retention bonuses, which had only been paid to certain sections of workers. The rock drillers were then joined by around 12,000 colleagues when the company tried to sack them.

The dispute has seen clashes that have led to three deaths. Miners involved in the strike have looked to the Association of Mining and Construction Union (AMCU) to uphold their interests. They accuse the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) of not fighting the company's divisive retention bonus scheme. Currently the NUM has a sole representative rights agreement with the company, but its appeals to the miners to return to work have not been heeded.

The company has reportedly lost 100,000 ounces of platinum as a result of the action—costing R2 billion (\$270m) in lost revenue.



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