

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

9 March 2012

Iberian airline workers to strike

Workers are set to strike the Spanish airline Iberia in a series of rolling 24-hour actions later this month and in April and May. Iberian workers are in an ongoing dispute with parent company International Airlines Group, which plans to establish a new low-cost airline, Iberia Express, on March 25.

Workers shut down Athens transport in one-day strike

The metro, trams, and ISAP trains in Athens ground to a halt on March 1, as workers staged a 24-hour stoppage against the government's austerity programme, including the slashing of wages and pensions.

Many workers have already taken early retirement in order to avoid facing even more cuts, with the resulting lack of staff causing serious operational problems.

Culture Ministry staff in Greece to continue protests

Staff employed by the Culture Ministry announced this week that they will protest against the austerity programme every Thursday in March. In October 2010, staff employed at the Acropolis in Athens held a three-day strike to protest the loss of 320 temporary employees' jobs. The strike ended only after it was brutally suppressed by riot police mobilised by the previous PASOK government of Prime Minister George Papandreou.

Medical staff protest in Thessaloniki, Greece

On Wednesday dozens of emergency medical workers employed by the National First Aid Centre (EKAB) held a rally in Thessaloniki, Greece's second city. The workers are protesting against a new nationwide civil service payroll scheme that will result in deep pay cuts.

One of the protesters involved told *Kathimerini*, "We are already owed money from May and June, and now because of the retrospective cutbacks many of us will get paid just 100 euros [US\$133] a month for the next three months".

Workers employed by PASOK protest non-payment of wages

Staff employed by Greece's Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) held a protest Wednesday at the party's headquarters in Athens to demand the payment of four months' wages.

The action involved several dozen staff who blocked the front of the building on Ippokratous Street for an hour. PASOK was elected in 2009 and immediately began to impose an unprecedented austerity programme. It is now part of the unelected coalition of Prime Minister Lucas Papademos, with the conservative New Democracy party.

PASOK is heavily indebted and owes an estimated €120 million (\$160 million). It has been forced to borrow against future state funding.

Air traffic controllers strike in Cyprus

Air traffic controllers in Cyprus struck on Wednesday for four hours in a pay dispute. The action was held between 12 p.m. and 4 p.m. local time and affected 36 flights at two airports.

The workers are protesting cuts to their wages and overtime pay. The Air Traffic Controllers Union announced that further strikes will be held on March 12 and 15 if the dispute is not resolved.

Belfast Telegraph printers protest job losses

Printers employed by the *Belfast Telegraph* in Northern Ireland held a demonstration on Tuesday. The members of trade unions Unite and the National Union of Journalists are protesting against 24 job losses at the newspaper's offices as part of a transfer of production to its plant in Newry. The printing workforce will be cut from 175 to 151.

UK Department for Work and Pensions staff strike in Liverpool

Staff at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in Merseyside, England staged a three-hour strike on March 5. The workers are protesting the transfer of 100 administration staff from job centres to two contact centres in Garston and Bootle.

The PCS said the move by the DWP would result in a 28 percent reduction in administration staff on Merseyside.

Meat processing workers strike over pay in Glasgow, Scotland

Workers at meat processing company Vion in Glasgow struck on March 8 in a pay dispute. A previous one-day strike by the workers was held February 20.

The company is attempting to impose a 2 percent pay deal, an increase below the rate of inflation, as well as changes to holiday entitlement.

The workers are members of the Unite trade union. Over the last three years since the onset of the global economic crisis, Unite has collaborated with many companies in imposing pay agreements detrimental to workers' interests. This was acknowledged by Unite convenor Scot Walker, who said of the Vion dispute, "A 2 percent increase in today's financial climate is a pay cut in real terms. This comes on the back of a similar offer in 2010 and a pay freeze in 2009. If you keep pushing workers like this they are going to push back."

This was a critical factor in the company being able to report a surge in profits last year.

Walker stated that the union had attempted to settle the dispute by going to the arbitration service ACAS, "but the company refused to budge".

Last year the firm announced that it was closing its sausage production factory in Sheffield, with the loss of 205 jobs.

Egyptian gold workers strike for better pay and conditions

On March 3 workers at a gold mine in Sukari, in Egypt's Eastern Desert region, began strike action to demand better pay and conditions, including increased hazard pay. The strike resulted in the cessation of operations at the plant, the Centamin-Egypt company informed the London Stock Exchange on March 6.

The firm, a joint Egyptian-Australian consortium, condemned the strike as "illegal" with the support of the Egyptian Mineral Resources Authority and the Ministry of Petroleum.

Cotton workers in Minya, Upper Egypt blockade rail network

On Tuesday workers at the Nile Cotton Ginning Company in Minya, Upper Egypt blockaded the railway network to demand payment of more than six months' wages.

The action is the latest in series of blockades of the rail network since last year's January revolution against the dictatorship of former President Hosni Mubarak. From January 28, 2011 to January 10, 2012, the Egyptian Railways Authority reported it has lost LE70 million (\$11.6 million) in revenue as a result of sit-ins and strikes. During this period, 1,720 trains nationwide have been delayed.

Fired workers protest in Bahrain

On March 1, hundreds of workers protested outside the Ministry of

Labour in Bahrain to demand reinstatement. Last year more than 2,000 workers were dismissed following the mass protests against the US-backed monarchy. Only a few workers have been reinstated, with many forced to accept employment on inferior pay and conditions.

Unemployed workers protest in Tafilah, Jordan

On Monday, unemployed workers staged a sit-in to demand jobs in front of the governorate building of the southern city of Tafila, Jordan. The protest was broken up by heavily armed riot police. The following day, protests continued in the city centre. The protesters were again attacked by riot police who used teargas.

Construction firm workers strike in pursuit of unpaid wages in Oman

On March 4, around 2,000 construction workers in Oman employed by Nagarjuna Construction Company International (NCC) struck at several sites. NCC is an Indian-owned operation and workers are protesting to demand unpaid wages.

One worker told the *Gulf News*, "We have not been paid for the last two months." Another commented, "Some of our colleagues are still staging a sit-in". He said that many workers had only gained employment in Oman after paying hefty fees to recruitment agents, explaining he had been forced to pay 20,000 Indian rupees (\$400) to an agent. "Some workers have paid much more to the agent," he added.

South Africa: Thousands take part in nationwide strike and protests

Thousands went on strike and took part in marches all across South Africa on Wednesday. They were protesting against the use of labour brokers and the imposition of tolls on motorways. The marches were organised by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 32 towns and cities.

Currently there are around 40 tollgates operating on the N1, N3, N12 and R21 freeways. The ANC government has imposed tolls partly to pay for the upgrading of the motorway system prior to South Africa holding the football world cup in 2010.

COSATU is calling for banning the use of labour brokers, which supply labour to companies and cream off some of the workers' earnings. A press statement issued by the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) said that in some workplaces up to 70 percent of the workforce is supplied by labour brokers, with those workers earning as little as 30 percent of the wage of the directly employed.

There has been a big growth in labour brokers since 1995, offering a temporary pool of workers to companies seeking to maximise their profits by having a highly flexible workforce.

Gold Fields, one of the world's largest gold producers, reported an 85 percent abstention by workers. Harmony Gold reported that all National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) affiliated staff were absent and the coal mining company Anglo American reported a majority of its employees absent.

The Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA) called on its members to join the protests; the South African Student

Congress likewise called on students to participate.

Kenyan nurses strike

Nurses organised by the Union of Kenyan Civil Servants began a strike at the end of last week over wages and conditions. After two days, the union announced it had come to an agreement and called an official end to the dispute.

Nurses repudiated the deal, however, and refused to return to work. One nurse explained, “We were not consulted and there is nothing that has been put on the table. We are not convinced by the deal reached ... we feel duped.”

The government went to the industrial court and obtained a court order deeming the strike illegal. It threatened that any nurse not returning to work by 2 p.m. on Tuesday would be considered to have left his or her job. The nurses did not heed the threats.

Weeklong strike by Kenya Broadcast Corporation staff ends

Workers in the Communication Workers Union at the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) began a strike last week protesting poor pay, bad conditions and non-payment of arrears.

The government response, spearheaded by the Information Minister Samuel Poghisio, was to threaten striking workers with the sack. Adverts were placed in newspapers to recruit a scab workforce.

The strike had an impact on KBC’s ability to produce programmes, particularly news.

The CWU was desperate to avoid the strike, with Secretary-General Benson Okwaro stating, “They should have waited for negotiations we had initiated to address the matter.”

Vincent Lempaa, a spokesman for the striking workers, told reporters they did not want to be represented by Okwaro and were looking to another union to represent them. However, following further discussion, the workers returned to work on Wednesday. Poghisio agreed to address their grievances and promised Sh940 million (\$11.4 million) to cover wage arrears.

Zambian copper miners end strike

The strike by 2,000 copper miners at the Canadian-owned First Quantum Minerals Ltd. at the Kansanhi mine ended on Tuesday after a week.

The company agreed a 15 percent pay increase.



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