

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

16 March 2012

## Hundreds of thousands protest across Spain

Hundreds of thousands demonstrated across Spain Sunday against labour reforms introduced by the Popular Party government.

A general strike has been called for March 29.

Unions said rallies took place in 60 cities and towns across the country, including in the capital Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Seville. They estimated up to 500,000 demonstrators in Madrid, with another 450,000 in Barcelona.

Before a rally in Madrid's Puerta de Alcala square, protesters held a minute's silence in memory of the victims of the March 11, 2004 bombing of Madrid commuter trains that killed 191 people.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's government cut maximum severance pay liable by private-sector employers from 45 to 33 days salary for each year worked, for a maximum working-time of 24 years. The government has also announced spending cuts of €8.9 billion (US\$11.5 billion) that include a public sector wage freeze, and higher taxes on income, savings and property.

Spain has only had five general strikes since the death of Francisco Franco and the end of his fascist regime in 1975.

The country's unemployment rate is the highest in the developed world at nearly 23 percent, with the rate at almost 50 percent for workers aged under 25.

## Strike at Cork Institute of Technology over reinstatement of colleagues

Members of the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) in the Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) are to take part in a one-day strike March 21 to demand the reinstatement of six workers made redundant by the institute's catering company last week.

The workers were made redundant by management of Students Services Ltd, a private company which oversees the running of catering and retail outlets on the CIT campus.

Pickets are to be placed on all entrances to CIT on Wednesday. Student Services Ltd employs 44 workers. The company runs four catering and two retail outlets on the CIT campus.

## Protest over closure of Technicolor plant, France

French trade unions held a protest Wednesday against the closure of Technicolor's STB plant in Angers, France.

Technicolor is looking for a buyer for the plant, which is the firm's last production facility in Europe, employing 350 workers.

The trade unions are calling on the Sarkozy government to step in and direct French Telecom produce its new Livebox in France, not Asia as intended. The unions claim this would save some 700 jobs across the country.

## Estonian miners to stage protest over collective bargaining dispute

Workers belonging to the Independent Union of Miners and Energy Workers are planning a protest against changes to the law on collective bargaining, according to Estonian public broadcaster ERR News. Just a week earlier, Estonian unions conducted the largest labor action the country has seen for decades.

The proposed demonstration in Jõhvi's central square March 17 follows a rally that took place in Tallinn a month earlier. It calls for a parliamentary committee's recent amendments to the Collective Agreements Act that allow employers to unilaterally pull out of a collective agreement six months after it expires to be abandoned.

## Teachers in Estonia in three-day strike

Teachers across the country took a three-day strike this week to demand a minimum 20 percent rise in their base salary this year.

On March 6, Minister of Education Jaak Aaviksoo proposed a rise of 15 percent starting 2013, an offer that was rejected.

On Wednesday, 64 schools and 59 kindergartens struck in Tallinn, double the previous day's total.

The Education Personnel Union states that over 16,000 grade school and kindergarten teachers throughout the country took part.

The action by teachers triggered a week of sympathy strikes across Estonia that also targeted the new Collective Agreements Act.

## Workers' protests block Egyptian parliament and Ministry of Health

Members of parliament and ministers were blocked from entering the Egyptian parliament building Tuesday, as Parliament Street was cordoned off by security staff.

Demonstrating workers were attempting to present their demands to parliament in front of the main gate of the Shura Council in Kasr Al-Ainy

Street. Petrojet company workers demonstrated in front of the Ministry of Health.

### **Israeli railway workers in wildcat strike**

On March 9, the Israel Railways workers committee called a wildcat strike against the government's planned railways reform.

As a result of the industrial action, lines due to close for imminent track development and maintenance will now stay open.

### **Kuwaiti state department workers to stage two-hour strike**

A two-hour daily strike by staff in several state departments is to begin March 19, in protest against unpaid financial allowances by the government.

The Kuwait Trade Union Federation (KTUF) staged a sit-in last Wednesday, after reports that the government plans to pass general pay raises ranging between 20 and 40 percent—lower than workers are demanding.

### **Kuwaiti customs workers strike over pay**

Customs workers in Kuwait went on strike March 13 over wages. Employees last waged a strike in October, disrupting oil shipments from the OPEC member state.

In October, some 3,000 workers took part in the two-day walkout. The latest action was smaller. The country produces around 3 million barrels of oil a day, according to the state oil company KPC. Thanks to high global oil prices, the government posted a budget surplus of \$47 billion in the first nine months of 2011, nearly double the surplus in 2010.

### **Protest by Namibian fishermen**

Two hundred workers at the NovaNam fishing company in Luderitz protested Tuesday over the company's plan to discharge 28 fishermen and the company's failure to honour a pay agreement. The workers, represented by the Namibia Food and Allied Workers' Union (NAFAU), have declared their intention to strike if the pay dispute is not settled before the end of the month.

The company has not adjusted its pay rates in line with an agreement reached with NAFAU in December last year. The workers also accuse the company of hiring casual workers to avoid paying benefits and of denying supervisors the right to be represented by the union.

### **Kenya: Nairobi municipal workers stop work over wages delay**

Nairobi City Council workers stopped work Tuesday and picketed City

Hall. They were protesting the delayed payment of their February salary.

One worker explained, "I have worked for 30 days and I need to be paid... We have been told that maybe by 1 p.m. or 2 p.m. we shall be paid, but without proof of that money we are not going away from here."

### **Kenyan sugar cane workers strike**

Drivers employed to transport the sugar cane crop from the fields to the processing plants of Mumias Sugar in Western Province went on strike at the beginning of the month. The company buys the cane grown by farmers in the region.

The drivers have not been paid for three months. They abandoned the lorries laden with sugar cane in protest. The drivers work for PanAfric Transporters. When they were hired the company was called Rish Hauliers and they have now been told it has changed its name yet again to Sunrise. The switch of names appears to be an attempt to hide the parlous state of the company's finances, which has used money set aside for salaries to buy fuel.

### **Kenyan health workers return to work**

A strike by nurses that began March 1 has been called off after talks between the Union of Civil Servants and the prime minister. The nurses were protesting the government's failure to fund an agreed pay rise negotiated with the union last year. They were also protesting the poor conditions in many of the public health facilities throughout the country.

The government branded the strike illegal and last week sent out around 25,000 letters dismissing many of the nurses.

As part of the settlement ending the strike, the government has withdrawn the dismissal letters. Although the union has agreed a return to work, no settlement was spelt out. The union's secretary general told the press, "We have held talks and we have agreed health workers will resume duties, and all their grievances will be looked into by a special task force."



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