

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

23 March 2012

German public service workers stage warning strikes

Public service workers in Berlin and western Germany staged a third day of strikes this week in a pay dispute.

The workers are demanding a 6.5 percent increase this year for 2 million federal and municipal government employees, having rejected a 3.3 percent increase over two years that would fail to keep pace with inflation.

According to union sources, around 20,000 workers participated in the work stoppages in northern Lower Saxony state and nearby Bremen city-state.

Limited warning strikes were held in various parts of the country by the Verdi union ahead of the next round of pay talks scheduled for March 28 and 29.

Workers striking in Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia included bus drivers, garbage collectors and kindergarten staff.

An estimated 130,000 workers took part in a previous wave of industrial action across the country at the beginning of the month.

Greek seamen's union calls off strike

On Monday, Greek seamen launched a 48-hour strike in opposition to cuts to pensions and changes to collective labour contracts. The government plans to move the seamen's social insurance scheme, NAT, into a new scheme, EOPPY. Under new legislations, NAT pensioners have already had their pensions slashed by up to €500-€600 per month.

Even though the Panhellenic Seamen's Union (PNO) stated that it would continue with rolling two-day strikes until authorities address its concerns, the strike was called off after the second day following talks Tuesday between the union and Development, Competitiveness and Shipping Minister Anna Diamantopoulou.

The normal sailing schedule resumed Wednesday morning after Diamantopoulou merely gave a series of written replies, based on consultations with four ministries, to the PNO.

Once again, the trade unions have called off a strike in a critical sector of the Greek economy. Labour and Social Insurance Minister Yiorgos Koutroumanis, who attended talks with Diamantopoulou, acknowledged that the two-day action was having "major repercussions on the economy".

French riot police attack striking steelworkers with tear gas

On March 15, riot police attacked 200 protesting steel workers near Nicolas Sarkozy's election campaign headquarters in Paris. The workers have been on strike since February 20, to oppose the continuation of short-time working and management threats to close the plant.

As the workers neared the HQ in the southwest of the capital, they were confronted by a line of riot police. The workers attempted to proceed and were then attacked by the police, who pushed them back with riot shields before firing tear gas.

Antoine Terrak, one of the workers attacked, commented to the Associated Press, "We just came to defend our jobs. And here's what they do to us."

The workers attempted to unfurl a banner from the first floor balcony of the Eiffel Tower, but were prevented by the police.

UK: Industrial action on London Heathrow Express

On Thursday, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) called off a two-day strike set to take place on March 24 and 25 by staff on the London Heathrow Express (HEX). The action was in protest at the sacking of driver Zahid Majid and the continuing victimisation of union activist Liaqat Ali.

A statement on the RMT website said: "In discussions with ACAS [Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service], RMT disclosed further evidence that despite the fact that Liaqat Ali was completely cleared of all allegations a HR manager is now attempting to put further allegations against him in his personal file. This continued vindictive attack on our elected representative has effectively sabotaged efforts to resolve the dispute as he is not being allowed to 'return without prejudice'."

A recent two-day strike forced the total cancellation of Heathrow Connect, with HEX reduced to a skeleton service operated by managers.

In his statement calling off all action, RMT general secretary Bob Crow wrote that following talks with the company, Zahid Majid has now lost his job. This was after the RMT had attempted to push through a shabby deal, with the agreement of HEX to have Majid reinstated on a lower-grade contract.

Crow said, "In December 2011, following his [Zahid Majid] dismissal, RMT initially secured our member the offer for 're-engagement' with HEX on a lower grade basis. However, as this was not a reinstatement and involved lost service, etc., Brother Majid rejected it. I can now report that Brother Majid is now no longer seeking reinstatement following long negotiations and agreed arrangements with the company. This means there is no longer a trade dispute regarding this matter."

Crow claims that Majid is "thankful for the support and opportunity to move on that RMT have given him."

Regarding Liaqat Ali, the agreement means that he is "to resume work in his substantive post and all further disciplinary investigations/actions

are to be withdrawn. New policies and procedures will be reviewed and agreed,” said Crow.

Poland: Mechanics at Warsaw airport on indefinite strike

Mechanics at Warsaw’s Okecie airport began an indefinite strike Monday over pay and conditions. OPZZ trade union representative Jan Guz said, however; “Staff are over-burdened by work. An error could occur at any time.”

Egyptian public transport workers resume suspended strike

Public transport workers resumed a suspended strike across Cairo and Giza this week. The Public Transportation Authority (PTA) has refused to honour an agreement struck last year with striking workers.

The strike, across Greater Cairo, includes drivers on all bus routes, along with PTA workers and the authority’s engineers and technicians.

The protesting workers are demanding their pensions be made equivalent to 100 months of their salary, instead of the present 28 months allowed by the PTA. Ten percent of all salaries are deducted monthly for pensions, which the drivers claim they do not receive at the age of retirement.

Other demands include better health care and that the drivers receive compensation for the risks they face in their jobs.

One worker told *Al-Masry Al-Youm* that the transport authority “deliberately failed to respond to the workers’ demands since the 4 October strike, which ended after LE128 million was allocated by former Prime Minister Essam Sharaf’s cabinet. But only LE45 million of the mentioned sum reached the PTA.”

Ground staff strike at Muscat International airport, Oman

At least 200 ground services department staff struck at Muscat International Airport (MIA) to demand extra allowances to cover the rising cost of living and an eight-hour day as opposed to the present nine hours.

Several flights were delayed. The striking workers included baggage handlers and drivers; some counter staff also joined the strike.

Sierra Leone University staff strike

Strikers at Njala University were invited to talks with University administration Monday. They are members of the Academic Staff Association. Njala is Sierra Leone’s second largest university and comprises campuses at Bo and Njala.

Their demands are for a 113 percent pay rise, improved working conditions and an increase in allowances. They are seeking parity with their colleagues at Sierra Leone University, who were awarded a 100 percent-plus pay increase earlier this year.

The workers began their strike on March 12.

Burundi trade union federations threaten general strike

The Confederation of Burundi Unions (COSYBU) and Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Burundi (CSB) have threatened a general strike starting today.

The threat is in response to the government plans to increase electricity and water tariffs. The planned increases come in the face of high inflation and rises in prices of basic commodities.

Swaziland public sector workers plan strike

Public sector unions comprising the Swaziland National Association of Teachers, the Swaziland Nurses Association, the National Public Service and Allied Workers Union and the Swaziland National Association of Government Accounts Professionals have threatened strike action starting in April. This is to push their claim for a 4.5 percent pay increase.

The Swaziland government is trying to reduce its public sector pay bill by around 10 percent.

Lagos University workers strike in Nigeria

Joint action by unions representing medical, nursing and non-academic staff at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) began a three-day strike Monday. The strike was in response to the non-payment of their February salaries.

LUTH chief medical director Professor Akin Oshibogun responded by saying staff would receive their money “very soon.”

Nigeria: Oyo State Government workers strike over minimum wage

Workers at Oyo state government began a strike Monday over the state’s failure to pay the N18,000 (US\$114) monthly minimum wage passed into law by the federal government last year. Currently, Oyo state government imposes a N13,000 (US\$83) minimum wage. The strike had widespread support, with most schools throughout the state being closed and the Oyo state secretariat at Agodi ground to a halt.



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