

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

## Spanish workers continue protests against government austerity

On August 23, workers protested in the Spanish capital Madrid and other cities against the austerity programme of the government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy.

In Madrid, demonstrators protested outside the Finance Ministry. The protests, involving workers from a number of trade unions, were continuing for a fourth successive weekend.

## Workers at Siliken plant in Rafelbunyol, Spain, protest job losses, pay cut

Hundreds of workers employed at the Siliken photovoltaic manufacturing plant in Rafelbunyol, near Valencia, Spain, protested August 23 against the company's plans to sack 100 workers and impose an 11 percent pay cut.

During the strike workers staged a protest in the streets of Valencia.

Siliken employs more than 1,000 employees, and has its own polysilicon factory in Spain. The company has justified the move on the basis that costs must be lowered, referring to the cheaper production costs it has attained as a result of opening a factory in Timisoara, western Romania.

The firm had previously shifted production from one plant to another in an attempt to bolster profits. Last year, Siliken closed a module plant in Ontario, Canada. It also moved production from its US facility in San Diego to another site in Mexico, less than 20 miles away.

In 2011, Siliken's revenue grew about 15 percent. This was well below the 40 percent growth it had predicted.

## Irish haulage firm workers stage sit-ins

Sacked haulage firm workers employed by Target Express in Ireland began a sit-in this week, when the company suddenly stopped trading on Monday. The company is one of Ireland's largest, with hundreds of jobs set to be lost. Three hundred of these are in the Irish Republic and up to 150 jobs in the UK—most in Northern Ireland.

The firm stopped trading when the Revenue Commissioners froze its accounts due to debts, reportedly of around €500,000. Workers employed by the firm have lost their jobs and are also owed two weeks in pay.

A report in the *Belfast Telegraph* Tuesday cited a worker who said that around 15 staff were stopping freight leaving the firm's depot in Little Island, Cork. A sit-in was also being held at the firm's depot in Carlow, and protests are also being held at other sites around the country.

As well as its depots in Newry, Londonderry, Lisnaskea, Nutts Corner and Cookstown in Northern Ireland, the company also has bases in London, Birmingham and Manchester, in England.

## Italian carbon miners begin occupation of mine

On Sunday, more than 100 carbon miners began a strike and barricaded themselves in the Carbosulcis mine in Carbonia, west of Cagliari, on the island of Sardinia. The workers are seeking to keep the mine open and prevent its privatisation. The mine is owned by the local Sardinian regional government and is the main supplier to a nearby power plant run by state-controlled energy firm Enel.

According to a trade union representative, the occupation began when 40 workers remained 400 metres underground in the mine, which also contains around 100 kilograms (220 pounds) of explosives. These were joined by an additional 80 workers the following day.

This week, the government refused to transform the mine into a joint mining and carbon-capture project. Undersecretary of Economic Development Claudio De Vincenti said such a scheme would cost €250 million (£198 million) a year for eight years. He told an Italian newspaper, "That's almost 200,000 euros per miner. It's an unsustainable cost"

The unemployment rate in Sardinia is 16 percent, and in the area in which the mine is located, it is the only source of employment for local residents.

## Municipal workers begin 48-hour strike in Athens, Greece

On Thursday, municipal workers began a two-day strike in the Greek capital, Athens. The municipal workers are striking to oppose new laws to terminate a number of municipal services and the slashing of their pay.

Monthly state funding last year for Greece's 370 municipalities stood at €168 million. This year it was cut to €135 million a month, and the latest austerity cuts reduce this even further to €96 million per month. By the end of the year, government funding for the entire national network is set

to fall to €72 million per month.

Municipal employees' pay nationwide has been cut from €135 million in 2010 to €74 million so far this year.

These cuts will have devastating consequences, with the Press TV web site noting that they will jeopardise the heating and maintenance of schools and leave some 50,000 families in Athens outside of the kindergarten schooling grid.

Municipal home care for the elderly, soup kitchens, clothing, sheltering, and clinics for the poor and homeless are all services threatened with imminent termination. Another looming problem is the maintenance of roads and parks, the collection and management of the city's waste, even free cultural and athletic activities for the youth—all have come under the hammer of the austerity fiscal strategies.

### **UK Public and Commercial Services suspends strikes at Department for Work and Pensions call centres**

This week, the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) trade union suspended further strikes in Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) call centres. A strike scheduled for September 3 has been called off, with the PCS web site issuing no statement as to why the strike was suspended.

Workers at the DWP call centres were protesting staff cuts and what the PCS described as “oppressive working conditions and unrealistic targets”.

The decision to call off further action comes just weeks after 6,000 members of the PCS struck at call centres nationwide.

### **Train workers at TransPennine in England strike for 24 hours**

Cleaners, security staff and dispatchers at the TransPennine train operating company in England struck for 24 hours on August 24.

The staff, members of the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) struck to demand an increase in pay from the Carlisle Cleaning and Support Services, which had offered what was a pay cut.

The already low-paid workers have no sick pay, no enhanced pay rates for working overtime, nights, weekends or even bank holidays, and no paid meal breaks.

No further action has been called by the union, except a two-week overtime and rest-day working ban, set to end on September 7. The RMT has called for further talks to be held with the company; its leader Bob Crow stated, “Carlisle knows that RMT is ready to talk but the company needs to recognise our members' anger and accept that it needs to make a positive move towards us”.

### **UK Unite trade union calls off River Severn toll booth strike**

Unite, the UK's largest trade union, has called off a scheduled strike of workers at toll booth workers on two bridges on the River Severn. The strike involving 70 workers was scheduled for September 24 in a dispute over shift patterns.

Calling off industrial action, Unite regional officer Jeff Woods commented, “Unite and the company have reached agreement on a range

of issues, including those that initiated the vote in favour of industrial action”.

### **Jordanian workers protest at Finance Ministry to defend pension rights**

On Sunday, some 80 workers belonging to various trade unions protested outside the Jordanian Parliament in Abdali against attacks on workers' pension rights contained in the Social Security Law currently being debated.

The government is seeking to raise the minimum age of early retirement. In a temporary law legislated in 2010, this was to rise from 45 to 50. In discussions with trade unions, this was only cut slightly to 48.

According to the Electricity Workers Union, the government has now reneged on this agreement.

The *Jordan Times* reported the comments of one of the protesters, Dawood Salem, who said, “Many workers are sick and they are longing to retire early and rest”. He added, “Under the temporary law, a worker's pension is calculated based on his salary during the past five years, whereas in the old version, it was the last two years of work. If the workers' salary is low, he will not receive a fair pension. He concluded, “If the law is not amended, it will reflect negatively on every Jordanian family”.

### **Nigerian oil workers' union calls off strike**

On August 24, the main Nigerian oil workers' union, the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), called off a planned strike in opposition to the government's refusal to pay subsidy claims to indicted petrol importers.

The strike was called because 15,000 of the union's members had not been paid by petrol sellers. The union claimed this was because the government had withheld fuel subsidy payments to petrol sellers.

NUPENG president Igwe Achese said, “The strike action has been called off.... Within two weeks we will come back again, to sit down to look at the issues again”. He added, “We have also directed immediately that our tanker drivers should go back to work and make sure product is being lifted into Abuja”.

The strike by truck drivers had threatened to cause widespread fuel shortages. In the run-up to the planned stoppage, fuel stations in the capital Abuja were shut, causing long queues of motorists. In Lagos, long lines of motorists began forming two days prior to the scheduled walkout.

In January, the government of Goodluck Jonathan was hit by mass protests and strikes after it attempted to double fuel costs from 65 naira a litre (US\$0.40) to more than 140 naira, or almost US\$1. Fuel prices were then cut temporarily by a third, to 97 naira (about US\$0.60) per litre, in a move supported by the trade unions, which called off all protests against the government.

### **Swazi central bank workers' strike**

Around 140 workers at the Central Bank of Swaziland (CBS) in Mbabane went on strike at the end of last week in support of a pay increase. They are seeking a 7.2 percent pay increase and a 5 percent housing allowance increase. Management had offered a 6.1 percent pay rise, which they rejected. The bank employees, members of the Swaziland Union of Financial Institutions and Allied Workers, picketed the bank.

### **South African Wits university staff strike goes ahead**

Members of the Academic Staff Union of Wits University, Administration, Administration (ASAWU), Library and Technical Staff Association (ALTSA) and the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) went ahead with their threatened strike on Tuesday. This follows a one-day strike held August 2.

They are seeking a 9 percent pay increase and more funds for research projects, as well as improved car parking and child care facilities.

### **South African farmworkers oppose wage cut**

Around 300 farmworkers in De Doorns Township stopped work and marched 5 kilometres to the Keurboschkloof grape farm to protest a cut in their wages. The farm has been taken over by South African Fruit Exporters (SAFE) after the previous farm owner died.

They say they had been receiving a minimum wage of R90 (US\$11) per day with rates of R104 (US\$12) and R127 (US\$15) for skilled workers. However, following the takeover by SAFE, wages had been cut to R64 (US\$8) a day, across the board.

The workers were also calling for eight colleagues not taken on in July—when the new season began, after the takeover by SAFE—to be reinstated.

### **South Africa staff at Social Services Professional body strike**

Members of the Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union of SA (HOSPERSA) working for the SA Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) based in Pretoria began an indefinite strike Monday.

They are demanding an 8 percent pay increase and a R1,200 (US\$143) housing allowance. They have been picketing the SACSSP office in Pretoria.

The strike took place after the employer refused to negotiate. HOSPERSA provincial secretary David Rambua, speaking to the press, explained, “Some of the staff members with many years’ service receive salaries below the entry levels of Grade two cleaners in the public service.”

### **Nigerian education staff strike at three institutions**

Staff working in the Nasarawa State Polytechnic, the College of Agriculture, both based in Lafia, together with staff at the College of Education in Akwanga in Nasarawa state, began strike action Friday of last week.

Under the umbrella of the Joint Union of Tertiary Institutions, the workers are seeking payment arrears over the last 18 months since salary structures agreed with the federal government were signed into law but which the state government has so far failed to honour.

### **Kenyan registrars’ strike at Kenyatta National hospital**

Around 400 registrars at the Kenyatta National hospital in Nairobi began an all-out strike on Monday. The registrars are members of the Kenya Medical Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KPMU).

They are striking following the government’s failure to pay a Sh92,000 (US\$1,100) allowance that was agreed following the end of their previous strike eight months ago.

The registrars have called for the payment to be made within the next three weeks; otherwise they will mobilise for a national strike.



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