

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

21 September 2012

Thousands march against austerity in Lisbon

On Saturday, thousands took part in anti-austerity protests across Portugal. Demonstrators in the capital, Lisbon, threw tomatoes and fireworks at the Portuguese headquarters of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Two protesters were arrested.

Smaller demonstrations took place in around 40 other Portuguese cities. In the days before the protests, over 50,000 people used Facebook to announce their intention of attending the protest in Lisbon.

Last week, Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho announced an increase in workers' social security contributions from 11 percent to 18 percent of their monthly wage. Finance Minister Vitor Gaspar said income taxes will go up next year and public employees will lose either their Christmas or vacation bonus—roughly equivalent to a month's income. Many pensioners will lose both.

One protester, Magda Alves told the *Associated Press*, “What is being done in Portugal now was done in Greece, it is being done in Spain, and was also applied in other countries on other continents. ...The result was always the same: disaster.”

Alves added, “In Portugal, another package of recently announced government austerity measures could turn the nation's sullen acceptance of belt-tightening into an explosion of anger similar to that seen in Greece over the past two years.”

Portuguese oil workers strike against pay cuts and government Labour Code

On Monday, workers at Galp Energia, the national oil and energy company of Portugal, began a three-day strike over a cut in staffing levels and draconian changes in the labour code being imposed by the government. The strike began at Portugal's two refineries, a gas pipeline and sea terminals. Dozens of trucks queued at Lisbon's cargo terminal, the country's biggest, as the stoppage was underway.

Galp said some of its operations were affected, but that “supplies of oil products are proceeding normally.”

Galp owns the Sines refinery near Lisbon which processes 220,000 barrels per day as well as the Matosinhos refinery in Porto, refining 110,000 bpd.

The action also spread to stevedores who downed tools on Wednesday, and is set to be supported by port administration staff who are to strike Friday.

In another dispute, sea traffic controllers and workers at ports nationwide began a 48-hour strike, which mainly hit new ship dockings.

Thousands of Slovak teachers strike

Thousands of teachers took industrial action September 13, in their biggest strike in almost a decade to demand a 10 percent wage rise.

“Officials from the Trade Union of Workers in Education and Science of Slovakia said between 80 and 90 percent of primary and high schools and 30 percent of universities shut their doors as a result of the strike, the largest since 2003”, reported *Reuters*.

The news agency also pointed out that salaries of Slovak teachers are among the lowest among the countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and are also below the average wage in Slovakia itself—the second poorest country in the euro zone.

Teachers' pay averages €687 (\$890) a month, according to second-quarter data from the statistics office. The average worker receives €793. Teachers are often forced to seek additional jobs to supplement their income.

The government of Prime Minister Robert Fico is pledged to cut the national budget deficit to below the European Union's threshold of 3 percent of economic output next year from a forecast of 4.6 percent this year.

Spanish rail and subway workers strike

Rail and subway workers struck in Spain Monday to protest the government attacks on jobs, wages and labour rights, included in plans to reform the transportation sector next year.

The action resulted in the cancellation of hundreds of rail services and major traffic jams on roads into the capital Madrid and Barcelona. Around 300 trains run by the State rail firm Renfe were brought to a halt.

Whilst disruption was widespread, a pre-arranged agreement between trade unions and management ensured that 50 percent of trains ran throughout the day.

The strike coincided with rush-hour stoppages in Madrid and Barcelona by subway workers protesting pay cuts.

Rail transport staff strike in Athens, Greece

Rail public transport employed on the Athens metro, tram and Kifissia-Piraeus ISAP electric railway began a 24-hour strike Thursday to protest the coalition government's ongoing austerity programme, including the further €14 billion in cuts passed earlier this month.

The workers are also protesting plans to increase ticket prices and are demanding the government return ticket prices to 2009 levels. As well as a drop in prices to one euro, workers are calling for free transport for the unemployed, students and people on low pensions.

Amnesty International staff strike in London

Some 40 Amnesty International UK staff, based at the human rights organisation's London headquarters, struck on September 12 to oppose cuts of around £2 million. Amnesty employs around 200 staff in the UK and the strike was the first in more than 20 years against the group.

Amnesty is cutting costs in order that its UK organisation can contribute more finance to its international headquarters over the next decade.

The workers are members of the Unite trade union, who described the cuts as "an ill-conceived cost-cutting programme". Unite said the cuts would lead to redundancies. Amnesty's workers are already working under a pay freeze, the result of an agreement with Unite.

Unite said it did not know how many jobs were threatened and called for negotiations with Amnesty, stating, "Making redundancies when there is no financial crisis is at best misguided. We urge management to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the union."

In a statement, Amnesty said "Industrial action will not change" its plans, "but we will remain in contact with union officials on this matter and on other substantive questions raised in the process of reducing costs at AIUK. We have been and will continue to work to keep redundancies to a minimum."

UK University and College Union suspends industrial action over pensions

Last week the University and College Union (UCU) suspended any further industrial action over the government attack on the Universities Superannuation Scheme, (USS) pension scheme. It called off any future action in order to enter talks with representatives of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. The Universities Superannuation Scheme covers about 300,000 academics and senior administrators from universities established before 1992.

In a statement on its web site the UCU said, "a special conference of pre-92 branches agreed to seek a resumption of talks with the employers to resolve the USS dispute. If the employers agree to further talks then the union will suspend the current industrial action (work-to-contract) while serious and constructive negotiations are taking place."

Unite and GMB trade unions call off another Remploy strike in England

This week the Unite and the GMB trade unions suspended a scheduled five-day strike by disabled workers at the Remploy factory in Chesterfield, South Yorkshire, England.

The action by the unions is the latest in their campaign to sabotage resistance to the government's plan to close 27 Remploy plants by the end of this year.

Most of the factories were closed in August. Following two strikes in July, unions called off a third planned stoppage, facilitating the governments' closure programme. Remploy offers employment to the disabled and the closure plans will effectively abolish a work programme that was established as part of the post-war welfare system.

Northumbria, England hospital staff strike over pay dispute

Members of the Unison trade union at the Wansbeck Hospital in Northumbria, England struck for three days from September 14, in an ongoing dispute with Northumbria Healthcare Trust.

The dispute began at the end of June after the Trust halved the travel rate from 47 pence a mile to 24 pence a mile for staff who need to use a car in order to do their job and use their own vehicle.

Since the dispute began, staff have been involved in action "short of a strike, including refusing to use their own cars and travelling on public transport, as well as selective strikes", according to Unison. Since then the Trust made workers another offer, which was rejected by 74 percent of Unison members in a consultative ballot.

Serbian construction workers begin another hunger strike

On September 13, Serbian construction workers employed at the Ratko Mitrovic firm began a hunger strike for the second time this year. In April the firm went bankrupt, leaving workers unpaid. Despite taking legal action, the workers have been unpaid since March 15.

Cairo transport workers continue strike

Transport workers in Cairo, Egypt entered the third day of a strike throughout the Cairo metropolitan area Monday, in pursuit of higher salaries and to demand the board of directors be removed. Workers are also seeking to attach the Cairo Transportation Authority (CTA) to the Ministry of Transport, in order to achieve parity of pay and conditions with other state employees.

The strike led to the closure of five bus garages in the capital while 22 others began partial strikes.

Following a dispute last year over the same issues, an initial agreement was reached with CTA management. A union representative of the workers told *Ahram Online*, "It is still the same. We want to be attached to the ministry of transportation to enjoy the public sector's pay raises."

In an attempt to criminalise the strike, a top ranking official from the Muslim Brotherhood's political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) said Monday the workers were committing "treason", describing the strike as "criminal."

On Monday the government stepped up its repression of the strike by arresting Tarek El-Behairy, head of CTA's independent worker's syndicate.

Egyptian university staff strike over legal protections and pay

Staff at Cairo, Beni Soueif, Fayoum, Banha and Damansour universities started an open-ended strike Saturday, over demands which include the legal protection by incorporation under the University Organisation Law No 49 of 1972, according to *Ahram Online*.

The law legally provides "university workers with the right to elect heads of universities and giving workers the right to attend the meetings of the Supreme Council of Universities."

Other demands by university employees include that all university deputies are chosen by elections and not appointment, for all temporary workers to be given permanent contracts, for increasing overtime pay by 50 percent, increasing incentive rewards by 400 percent, and increasing exam bonuses to 600 working days' pay instead of 450.

Teachers and administrative staff of Cairo University have been on strike since last week demanding an increase in the minimum wage.

Egyptian doctor continues sit-in and hunger strike over salaries

Doctor Mostafa Al-Behairy has resumed the sit-in and hunger strike he started Saturday at the doctors' syndicate in Cairo, demanding better working conditions for medical staff. Doctors in Alexandria, Daqahliya, where Al-Behairy is from, and South Sinai have held protests in solidarity.

A member of the board of the Doctor's Syndicate, Ahmed Hussein has also started a hunger strike. He told the *Daily News Egypt* that his first demand is "that the country drops proposals to raise the salaries of doctors by raising the prices that patients have to pay for services. ... We doctors will not accept to have our salaries raised at the expense of the poor patients."

Al-Behairy said doctors want a salary that allows them a dignified life, without having to take a second job in a private clinic.

Another demand by doctors is the raising of the government's share of the budget allocated to medical care to 15 percent from the current figure of four percent.

Mohamed Rakha, from advocacy group Doctors Without Rights (DWR), said during the emergency general assembly on Friday, it will be decided if the doctors will strike in October.

Ghanaian bank workers strike

Workers at the Merchant Bank Ghana went on nationwide strike last week. They are demanding the reinstatement of the chairman of a local of the workers' union. They are also calling for the removal of both the bank's managing director and chair of the board, accusing them of bad management.

South African farm workers resume strike

Around 300 seasonal workers at the Keurboschkloof grape farm have gone on strike for the second time in less than a month. They have recently joined the Food and Allied Workers Union to push their wage claim. The farm has been taken over by the South African Fruit Exporters Company (SAFE), after the previous owner died.

SAFE cut wages, which under the previous owner had been between R90 (\$11) to R127 (\$15) per day, to a rate of R64 (\$8) across the board. When trucks arrived Monday in De Doorn's township to pick them up to take them to the farm, they refused to go. They are demanding SAFE up their wages to R2800 (\$340).

Around 20 percent of the workforce are foreign nationals from Zimbabwe and Lesotho. According to a spokesperson for the workers, SAFE has indicated that only 20 of the current workers will be given permanent employment with the rest being dismissed.

Strikes continue in Kenya

The strike by teachers represented by the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) and the Kenya Union of Post Primary Education Teachers (KUPPET) which began on September 3 is set to continue.

Government representatives snubbed a scheduled meeting between the unions and a parliamentary committee on Tuesday. Following the snub, KUPPET national chairman stated: "The government is not ready to talk and make sure that the strike is called off so that our students can go back to school. I therefore call upon all teachers to remain firm..."

Doctors and nurses at the Moi Teaching and Referral hospital in Eldoret are continuing their strike action. They are seeking improved pay and conditions, also calling on the government to provide Sh1.3 billion (\$15m) to adequately equip the hospital.

The strike by more than 10,000 lecturers and non-teaching staff at more than 30 universities across Kenya has entered its third week. They are seeing a new four-year collective bargaining agreement. They defied a joint statement by university chancellors threatening them with sacking if they did not return to work last Monday. They instead held marches and rallies in Nairobi in support of their action.

Nigerian medical workers begin indefinite strike

Medical workers represented by the Medical and Health Workers Union of Nigeria began a nationwide all-out strike on Monday over the non-implementation of the previously agreed Consolidated Health Salary Structure. Their action has already led to closure of some medical facilities in Lagos.

Kenyan workers strike Italian Space Agency

On September 14, workers employed by the San Marco Italian Space

Agency in Ngomeni, Kenya protested to demand a pay increase. More than 200 workers are involved in the dispute.

The Union of Kenya Building and Construction said the workers' salaries were last reviewed in 2010. The union said that a three years' contract with workers ended on January 31, 2011. The agency then renewed the workers' contract on February 1, without any salary increase.

A shop steward at the agency, speaking anonymously to the daily *Star* newspaper said, "Currently, the lowest paid worker earns Sh17, 000 and the highest Sh98, 000. This is just peanuts."



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