

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

19 October 2012

## Strike hits two Portugal refineries

Workers at two Portuguese refineries, owned by oil company Galp, began a five-day strike Thursday. The employees are protesting, in their second strike in two months, the new Labour Code imposed by the government. The law enables the slashing of holiday entitlement, redundancy pay, overtime rates and unemployment benefits, increases flexible working, and makes it easier for employers to sack workers and undermine collective bargaining.

The workers struck at the large Sines refinery near Lisbon, which processes 220,000 barrels per day, as well as the Matosinhos operation in Porto, that refines 110,000 bpd.

## French power workers strike at four plants

French power workers at plants owned by E.ON's coal-fired operations in Gardanne in the south of the country, Lucy in Burgundy, Hornaing in the north and Emile Huchet in the east struck on October 12.

The strike was in protest at E.ON's plans to close four out of seven coal plants and led to a reduction of 3,000 MW in output capacity.

## Spanish students protest against education cuts and austerity

Spanish students protested throughout Spain this week against education cuts being imposed by the Popular Party government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy as part of its austerity programme.

On Wednesday thousands of secondary and university students demonstrated in Madrid as part of a nationwide strike. Students are opposing the increase in university fees, as well as the reduction in the number of available scholarships and the declining in numbers of teachers and classes.

Speaking to Press TV, one Madrid protester stated, "We are here to demand that we have a right to education because every year workers pay tax for a public education and public health."

In Barcelona, more than 3,000 demonstrated, with similar numbers in Valencia and other cities.

## Italian steel workers continue strike to protest closure deadline

Steelworkers employed by ILVA employees in the southern Italian port city of Taranto continued protests last week over a court ordered closure of some of company's divisions. In July this year a court ruled that a smelting facility and mineral park had to close, citing it as the source of an ongoing environmental disaster.

The protests organized by the Fim and Uilm trade unions, were held to coincide with a court set deadline today for the initiation of the closures. The firm is being subjected to regulations which impose more environmental regulations, known as the Autorizzazione integrata ambientale per l'ILVA di Taranto.

## Norwegian postal transportation workers set to strike

Twenty workers employed by Bring Warehousing, the transportation company of the Norwegian postal service, were set to strike Monday. The strike was called in a dispute over pay and conditions and was expected to hit equipment deliveries to hospitals in the southeastern region.

## Gateshead College staff strike in the Northeast of England

Some 160 lecturers at Gateshead College in the North East of England struck on October 10 to protest attempts by management to enforce changes to working conditions.

College management have issued staff with 90-day notices to force the changes through. They want staff to have direct student contact for 36 of their 37 hours. The lecturers are members of the University and College Union. The strike was the second day of action, with a 24-hour stoppage also taking place the previous week.

According to the union one hour spent teaching required 30 minutes of support work. On this basis 33 hours of teaching in the new contracts would require another 17 hours of associated duties, for a total working week to 50 hours. These conditions would result in staff being forced to work beyond the 48 hours set by the European working time directive.

## University of East London lecturers strike in dispute over increased hours

Lecturers at the University of East London (UEL) struck on Thursday in a dispute over increased workload. The lecturers set up picket lines at the UEL sites in Stratford and Docklands campuses, as well as at the human

resources' office, also in Stratford.

The staff are members of the University and College Union (UCU), which was unable to prevent a strike despite last minute talks. A UCU official quoted in the *Times Higher Education* (THE) Wednesday said, "Strike action is a last resort and we'll continue to seek agreement up to the eleventh hour."

The *Times Higher Education* stated, "Academics say the university's proposed new workload policy would lead to more teaching, marking and assessment, branding it 'untenable and unjust.'"

It continued, "UEL topped a long-hours league table based on a recent UCU survey, which found 53.7 per cent of full-time respondents reported working more than 50 hours a week."

Further strikes are set for 23 October and 29 October, pending a resolution of the dispute.

### **University and College Union call off strike against redundancies at London university**

The University and College Union have called off future stoppages by academics at Queen Mary, University of London. On the basis of agreeing to further negotiation with the university, the union called off the action against planned redundancies. Last month 211 (65 percent) of the members at Queen Mary supported industrial action to protest processes being undertaken by the university to identify staff for redundancy.

The university is planning to make 20 academics from Queen Mary's School of Medicine and Dentistry unemployed as well as 11 from its School of Chemical and Biological Sciences department.

### **DHL workers to strike at Neasden depot in London**

Staff at transport and logistics specialist DHL's Neasden depot, north London are scheduled to strike on October 22 for 24 hours in a dispute over pay.

The workers, who voted unanimously to strike are seeking pay parity with their colleagues at the firm's Enfield depot.

### **Norwegian government imposes settlement in oil workers dispute**

The Norwegian government has imposed a settlement on oil workers, denying them the right to retire early and enforcing a no-strike deal. In July the workers held a 13-day strike to demand a pay increase and better conditions, including the right to retire at 62. The strike was ended by the government, as concerns grew about its widespread impact.

Under the Labour Ministry decree, the workers will receive a 4.5 percent pay increase but cannot retire early. The employees are also barred for two years from striking over the same issue.

### **Staff at Northern Ireland's universities, teaching colleges vote to strike over pay and conditions**

Thousands of university staff members in Northern Ireland's two universities and two teaching colleges have voted for industrial action in a dispute over pay and conditions.

The dispute involves technical, clerical and supervisory staff at University of Ulster, Queen's University Belfast, Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College.

The ballot recorded a 63.3 percent vote in favour of an all-out strike.

### **Pay strike by Estonian health workers enters third week**

A strike by health workers for a 23 percent pay increase for caregivers, 17.5 percent for nurses and 11 percent for doctors, entered its third week as the Medical Association and the Union of Estonian Health Care Professionals unanimously rebuffed the government and employers' offer from last week. Last week, the strike was expanded to inpatient care in these hospitals, and several county hospitals joined the strike.

The Estonian Hospitals union met with the state arbitrator Monday.

The Estonian Public Broadcaster *EER News* said: "The doctors and nurses said the changes proposed were too small and would not achieve the goal of the strike--to stop health care workers from leaving Estonia and to improve the situation for patients. They said they would not accept 'half-measures' and criticized the cabinet for what it said was an ultimatum."

The Health Insurance Fund proposed increases of 15 percent for caregivers, 10 percent for nurses and 6 percent for doctors, which would take place over two years.

### **London Underground workers vote overwhelmingly to strike**

Workers on the London Underground have voted overwhelmingly to take action in a consultative ballot.

A full 92.5 percent voted in favour of action.

The Executive Committee is expected to announce by the end of the week what action to take as a result of the recent ballot.

### **Strike action at Air France scheduled for end of month**

Ground staff on the French carrier Air France are due to walk out on October 26, at the start of the two-week school holiday.

The action has been called by the CGT union, which has so far declined to sign up to a major restructuring programme by the carrier. "Transform 2015" schedules cuts on 2 billion euros in costs, and a 20 percent increase in productivity over the next three years. Some 5,000 jobs are to be lost "voluntarily" by 2014, although Air France said it may lay off some of the staff if voluntary agreements failed.

### **Egyptian doctors' strike in third week**

A strike by doctors to guarantee better healthcare for patients has entered its third week.

The doctors are demanding a minimum wage, harsher penalties for those who attack hospitals and an increase in the state budget for health to 15 percent.

Some hostile news reports claim patients are being harmed by the strike, which began on October 1.

According to the *Daily News Egypt*, “A number of outpatient clinics have reopened after being closed by the strike. In Damietta governorate, half the outpatient clinics are now being run by consultants belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), according to Mohamed Shafiq, a media spokesman for the strike.”

The partial strike only targeted state-run hospitals.

Doctors decided that the theme of the strike would be the “free treatment strike” where patients wouldn’t have to pay for treatment at the outpatient clinics.

“During the general assembly held last month where the decision to start a partial strike was taken, the general committee governing the strike was elected by over 1,000 doctors, but the head of the syndicate and many board members walked out in opposition to the decision after they failed to convince the assembly that the committee should include them. The head of the syndicate and many board members then formed another committee, saying that theirs was the one representative of the strike,” said the *Daily News Egypt*.

### **Workers at Suez seaport demand company reinstate fellow workers**

Workers at the Suez seaport Ain Sokhna entered their seventh day of industrial action Wednesday, demanding the company DP World reinstate eight fellow workers whom they say had been fired arbitrarily.

“The company had accused the protesters of costing it LE40 million in five days, mostly resulting from fines by shipping companies,” said the *Egypt Independent*.

The crisis apparently escalated as the company refused to disburse allowances for staff union representatives for extra union activities.

On Saturday, DP World in Dubai said in a statement, “Labour issues have caused a significant slowdown in operations, impacting both customers and the Egyptian economy. We are working to resolve the issues appropriately as soon as possible.”

Ain Sokhna, near the southern end of the Suez Canal, is Cairo’s main port for cargo from East Asia.

DP World is the third largest port operator in the world.

### **Namibian hospital workers strike**

Around 300 hospital workers, including cleaners, ward assistants, kitchen staff and clerks at the two largest state hospitals in Windhoek, held a one day unofficial strike on Tuesday to press their demands, which include increases in salary and transport and housing allowances. Although the workers are members of the Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU), the strike was not sanctioned by the union, which said it was illegal because the workers had not followed procedures.

Some of the workers expressed hostility to the union, saying it did not have their interests at heart. Elizabeth Nantanga, a shop steward, explained a letter had been sent to NAPWU two weeks previously, but they had no response. Striking workers chanted, “Down NAPWU down,” as they picketed. They returned to work Wednesday pending further talks on Thursday.

### **Zimbabwean civil servants issue strike threat**

Civil servants organised in the umbrella Apex Council of unions last week issued a letter to the government announcing their intention to strike in pursuit of their long-term goal that all civil servants should be paid at least the current poverty datum line of \$600 per month. Currently many are paid below this level.

Takavafira Zhou, president of a leading union in the Apex Council, the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, accused the public service minister Lucia Matibenga of ignoring their demands.

### **Liberian teachers’ strike**

Teachers employed in the Monrovia Consolidated School System (MCSS) came out on strike Monday. They were protesting that some civil servants and teachers did not receive pay increases in line with those given to other civil servants in the newly elected government’s recent budget.

Their teachers association, the MCSSTA, had previously issued a series of demands for pay levels for teachers with differing levels of qualifications and experience and for bus transport around Monrovia to be provided.

MCSS students expressed support for the teachers’ action and said that they would hold demonstrations if the government failed to meet their demands.

### **South Africa strikes round-up**

Around 500 workers at the Toyota Boshoku factory, members of the National Union of Metalworkers of SA, were set to begin an indefinite strike on Wednesday. They make seats and door trims for Toyota cars.

They are demanding a retention bonus of R1500 (\$174) be paid to all workers at the factory. The company introduced the retention bonus in 2009, but it was only paid to skilled workers.

Bus drivers on the Rea Vaya rapid bus service that serves Johannesburg and Soweto went on strike Monday in a dispute over payments to a provident fund, for an adjustment of their shift patterns and for pay parity with dispatchers.

They are employed by Piotrans, who have a contract with the City of Johannesburg. The drivers’ union, the SA Municipal Workers Union, had been in talks with Piotrans, but the talks broke down last Friday.

Street cleaners in Germiston, east of Johannesburg, who have been out on strike for the last two weeks came under physical attack by their employer’s representatives on Monday whilst picketing. They work for a labour broker who supplies their services to the Germiston municipality. They are on strike to protest the use of labour brokers and to demand the same pay and conditions as those cleaners directly employed by Germiston municipality.

Their assailants went on to attack the offices of the Casual Workers advice office in Germiston, demanding to know the whereabouts of the strikers. A spokesman at the advice office accused the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) of turning its back on the workers.

SAMWU responded by stating, “The union...is willing to assist the workers, but ...feels workers must be responsible and first exhaust all bargaining and negotiating options before embarking on such a strike.”

Riot police broke the strike and occupation of the Kumba iron ore mine at Sishen on Tuesday. They arrested 40 workers and broke up the occupation of the mine, wherein the strikers had impounded the company’s trucks and bulldozers.

Around 300 workers had been on strike since October 3 in support of their demand for a R15,000 (\$1740) a month increase. On Monday Kumba, which is part of Anglo American, fired all those strikers who had failed to leave the occupation and attend disciplinary hearings.



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