

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

9 November 2012

## Journalists at Spain's *El País* strike over job cuts

Staff at the daily newspaper *El País* began industrial action Tuesday over management plans to cut the workforce.

"Workers posted pictures of an empty newsroom on the web and said on Twitter that 95 percent of the newsroom staff were observing the strike, due to last three days," said Reuters.

Workers had called off a strike planned for earlier when talks were mooted with Spanish media group owner Prisa. The talks reached an impasse.

Dozens of Spanish publications and media outlets have closed since the economic crisis in 2008. Advertising revenues have dropped dramatically. Advertisers in Spain expect to spend 15.1 percent less this year, according to a survey published by media consultancy Zenith.

Staff at *El País* rejected revised management proposals to dismiss 139 out of the paper's 460 posts and cut salaries for remaining staff by 13 percent. Staff took a 20 percent pay cut in 2011. The management plan also includes early retirement for some workers.

Prisa's chief executive, Juan Luis Cebrian, angered staff with comments that workers over 50 no longer fitted the newspaper's profile, saying: "We can't keep living so well." Cebrian earns €13 million a year. Workers facing pay cuts have demanded he return some of his salary.

## Staff at Spanish bank strike over jobs

Staff at Banco de Valencia are to strike for three hours Monday to protest plans to cut 400 jobs. The job losses would constitute a fifth of the workforce.

"The nationalised, Valencia-based lender is obliged to cut costs in exchange for receiving state aid. It made a loss of 400 million euros (\$512 million) in the first nine months of this year," said Reuters.

Along with Bankia, Catalunya Caixa and NovaGalicia Bank, Banco de Valencia is expected to receive part of a credit slice of up to €100 billion granted to Spain from the European Union.

## French oil workers strike against refinery closure

Workers at oil firm Total's Donges and La Mede refineries voted to strike for 24 hours on Monday to protest against the possible liquidation of a former Petroplus refinery in the north of the country.

"Workers at Total's Gonfreville refinery, the group's largest, did not vote to strike as most of the plant's units are already stopped because of

major maintenance that started two weeks ago and which is expected to end mid-December," reported Reuters.

According to officials, workers at the 158,000-barrels-per-day (bpd) La Mede and the 230,000-bpd Donges refineries cut output to the minimum level and stopped fuel product deliveries.

The commercial court in Rouen rejected two bids last month, to take over the former Petroplus Petit-Couronne oil refinery—France's oldest—sending it into liquidation unless a new offer was submitted by November 5.

Industry Minister Arnaud Montebourg said on Monday the government had asked the court to delay its decision because it had received a non-binding letter of interest from Libya's sovereign wealth fund.

## Portuguese dockworkers extend strike over changes to labour laws

Dockworkers extended a strike this week in at least four ports until November 28 as they protested a plan to change labour regulations.

Dockworkers at ports in Lisbon, Setubal, Aveiro and Figueira da Foz are expected to join the strike.

## Home help workers in Ireland protest over cuts

More than 1,500 home help workers and their supporters took part in a demonstration in Cork Saturday to protest cutbacks in their hours.

"Just over 1 million home help hours have to be cut from Health Service Executive [HSE] budgets by the end of 2012," reported RTÉ.

"The home help workers, who travelled from all over the country to today's rally, say the cuts will have a disastrous impact on society's most vulnerable people."

The Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union, which has almost 10,000 home help registered members, said it aimed at protests ahead of Labour Relations Commission talks with the HSE later this month and December's Budget.

## Scottish signallers strike in long-running dispute over rosters

All signalling workers at Stirling Middle, Stirling North and Dunblane are to take industrial action today over a dispute with the local management of Network Rail over 12-hour rosters.

## **Strike action threatened at Birmingham Airport, UK**

Workers at Birmingham Airport are to be balloted for industrial action after what was described as a “paltry” pay offer.

The company’s final offer is a 2.5 percent increase and a one-off non-consolidated payment of £150. It follows a three-year pay freeze.

An industrial action ballot will open on November 12 and close on November 26.

In the most recent ballot, 76.5 percent of workers returning ballot papers rejected the company’s offer.

## **Egyptian labourers in Saudi Arabia stage sit-in**

Around 4,000 Egyptian labourers in Jeddah, who were transferring luggage in King Abdul Aziz Airport for the pilgrimage season, staged a sit-in Wednesday in protest at the treatment of a colleague.

According to *Ahram Online*, Fathi Ismail, an Egyptian consular consultant, “was commissioned by Adel El-Alfy, Egypt’s ambassador to Saudi Arabia, along with consular representatives headed by Mohamed Al-Sharif, Egyptian consul in Jeddah, to resolve the protest which halted luggage transfers for a few hours.”

As the dispute was resolved with an apology, four Egyptian labourers who were arrested earlier by Saudi security forces during clashes, were released.

## **Israeli newspaper staff strike**

“Israel’s *Maariv* daily was absent from newsstands on Wednesday for the first time since its foundation in 1948, as workers began an open-ended strike over pay and conditions,” reported AFP.

The strike was due to the paper’s new proprietors’ failure to implement an agreement due to take effect Wednesday on wages and conditions.

There is ongoing uncertainty over how many staff will keep their jobs under the paper’s new religious right-wing publisher, Shlomo Ben-Zvi.

A court approved the sale of the paper and its printing works to Ben-Zvi on October 23 on the basis of the agreement with the workers.

Unions fear that about 1,600 of *Maariv*’s 2,000 employees will lose their jobs under the new ownership.

*Haaretz* is also “cost-cutting” and is reportedly in talks to sell its printing press to Yisrael Hayom, which is owned by US billionaire Sheldon Adelson, a major Republican donor and close confidant of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

## **Kenyan port workers win dispute**

Workers employed by the Kenya Ports Authority at Mombasa Port went on strike last Thursday over delays in making temporary workers permanent. Around 3000 were seeking permanent status.

Following several hours of discussion between the KPA management and the Dock Workers Union on Saturday, the workers were issued with contracts establishing them as permanent, and they returned to work at the

beginning of this week.

## **Swaziland textile workers strike**

Around 300 workers at the spinning and yarn manufacturers Spintex in Matsapha downed tools and picketed their factory last week, in pursuit of a 12 percent pay increase. Management had offered just 3.5 percent.

The workers are members of the Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied Workers Union. The Department of Labour intervened in an attempt to get talks going between management and the union.

## **Failed attempt to end Nigerian Plateau State workers’ strike**

An attempt at mediation in the six-month strike of Plateau State government workers has failed.

The workers are seeking implementation of the federal government N18,000 (US\$114) minimum wage.

Plateau State elders, led by Air Vice Marshal Bitrus Atukum, had sought to mediate between the state government and the National Union of Local Government Employees to end the strike. However, the talks failed as the sides failed to agree on the amount to be paid to cover the loss of wages during the six-month stoppage.

## **Ongoing strike in South Africa’s mines**

Miners at the Village Main Reef’s Buffelsfontein gold mine, near Klerksdorp, came out on strike Monday. The company is seeking a court order claiming the strike had not followed the procedures of the Labour Relations Act. It was not clear what the issues were.

Around 12,000 striking miners employed by Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) in Rustenburg still have not returned to work. Amplats is in negotiations with the National Union of Mineworkers and the National Union of Metalworkers, the Solidarity union and a strikers’ committee.

The company, however, has only proposed a R2000 (US\$230) hardship allowance to get the striking miners to return. This has been rejected by the 12,000 strikers who are demanding an increase in pay.

Miners working for AngloGold Ashanti at the Mponeng deep gold mine held a sit-in protest on Monday, just two days after they had resumed work following previous strike action.

According to the company, the dispute was settled by Monday evening, but operations were suspended again on Tuesday to check out safety conditions and assets in the mine.

## **South African farmworker’s strike**

Thousands of farm workers employed in the vineyards near the town of De Doorns went on strike Monday and marched to the town centre to protest. According to press reports some of the vineyards were set on fire.

They are seeking a living wage of R150 (\$17) a day but currently are paid only R63 (\$7) a day. One worker told reporters, “We don’t like to

see the bosses driving new double-cab bakkies (pick up trucks) and sending their kids to the best schools and then they come and tell us that 'no, the harvest was bad this year we cannot pay you more.' I have not personally burnt any vineyards down, but I know how people feel and I don't blame them for taking things into their own hands."

Pat Marran, a local ward councillor, explained the action sprang from spontaneous meetings: "People have come together and said that enough is enough. There are no leaders; there is no organisation or union or political party pulling the strings. These issues have been at play for generations, people have been exploited in this area for decades. They have had enough and today they are making a point."



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