Workers Struggles: Europe & Africa

30 November 2012

Italian workers storm Europe's biggest steel plant as it faces closure

"Workers stormed Europe's biggest steel plant ILVA, which faces closure over allegations of an environmental disaster, as Italy's government raced to save 20,000 threatened jobs," *Reuters* reported November 27.

Company management closed the factory's cold rolling facility in Taranto, southern Italy, which produces finished steel plates, strips and pipes, after a court ruling to seize the plant's steel output. A company spokesman told *Reuters* it was appealing against the ruling.

Around 20,000 jobs are now at risk in a region of high unemployment.

As well as the jobs immediately at risk, there is also growing concern about the knock-on effects of the closure on the rest of the country's heavy manufacturing.

Over a thousand workers at an ILVA processing plant near Genoa in northern Italy, which workers say will last just four days without supplies of steel from the southern plant, blocked a motorway into the city in a protest march.

Unions called a factory-wide strike over the closure of the cold rolling section of the plant.

When workers, some of whom have been employed at the plant for 30 years, arrived to the job on Tuesday morning, they found the gates locked. Several thousand stormed the facility and began a sit-in.

ILVA produced 8.5 million tonnes of steel in 2011—almost 30 percent of Italy's total output.

Greek municipal workers occupy town halls protesting against public sector job losses

Greek municipal workers occupied hundreds of town halls across the country for a fifth day last week to protest against public sector layoffs driven by the demands of the European Union (EU), European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

As part of its pledges to the EU, ECB and IMF lenders, the Greek government intends to place around 27,000 workers into a layoff scheme. City and local workers are expected to be among the first to be laid off under the plan.

"Their protests have intensified since the Greek government passed a package of austerity measures earlier this month, with workers this week staging daily sit-ins at more than two thirds of the country's 330 city halls and several ministries," said *Reuters* on November 22.

On the same day, around 3,000 municipal workers marched in central Athens chanting "Their measures—our funeral", holding black balloons. They carried a coffin and three wreaths in a symbolic protest against what they called the "the elimination of the public sector."

Over 40,000 clerks, nursery school teachers, gardeners, garbage collectors, policemen and gravediggers are employed in municipalities across the country.

Recently released data shows that household disposable income shrank by about 14 percent in the second quarter from the same period in 2011, as wages dropped by 15 percent and taxes increased by a massive 37 percent.

Health workers protest austerity measures in Madrid

Thousands of public health workers protested in the Spanish capital of Madrid Tuesday against the government's austerity measures. The demonstration was part of a second day of a public health workers strike in Madrid against the looming privatization of hospitals and health centres.

The protesters were holding anti-austerity flags as they marched in Madrid.

Presstv.com quoted Doctor Conchita Arroyo as saying: "Privatization cannot happen. They cannot privatize something that belongs to all of us and that we already pay for with our taxes."

Nurse Oscar Martinez said the government's austerity cuts are affecting the quality of the care for patients in public hospitals. "The cuts have been so abrupt that floors that used to have four nurses now have two, and patients are the ones suffering the consequences. They do not get the same attention," said Martinez.

The Spanish economy, the fourth-largest in the 17-nation euro zone, went into recession in the second half of 2008, wiping out millions of jobs. Official unemployment is around 25 percent, while the youth jobless rate is double that.

Workers at Spain's Iberia Airlines to strike

Workers at Spanish national airline, Iberia, are to take industrial action during the December holiday, according to a report on Spanish television network RTVE.

Earlier this month, Iberia's parent company the International Airlines Group (IAG) announced it would shed 4,500 jobs, 25 aircraft and several routes.

The company also aims to impose pay cuts on the 15,500 remaining staff, with pilots to take a reduction of over 47 percent and other workers of up to 35 percent.

Iberia's Division Chief Executive, Rafael Sanchez-Lozano, has made it clear that the company is not willing to jeopardise its plans to make operating profit of €300 million by 2015.

Between December 2011 and March this year, Iberia aircrew held 12 one-day strikes in protest at the launch of the Iberia low-cost airline Iberia Express and its resulting in poorer working conditions.

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London bus workers strike over another pay freeze

At least 2,000 bus drivers from nine garages across north London are expected to take a 24-hour industrial action this week following Arriva North's decision not to award workers a percentage pay increase this year despite massive profits.

Around 93 percent of the drivers who took part in the ballot voted to strike.

The drivers are in their second year of a pay freeze. April next year they will enter a third year of pay freezes.

Arriva North—the biggest single operator in London—tried initially to prevent the strike through court action, but was forced to drop its case.

DB Group, which owns Arriva PLC, made €853.6 million in profit before tax in the half year to June 30 this year.

Scottish workers strike paper bag plant over "no holiday" rule

Workers at Smith Anderson, a paper bag plant in Scotland, are to strike after being told that they have to work for six months without being allowed to take any statutory holiday.

The exclusion, between July to December, means they would miss the summer vacation. Staff also had two days statutory holiday in October taken away from them without consultation.

The workers are to take industrial action every Wednesday until the end of January in response to the company's decision.

Veolia refuse workers in England vote for industrial action

Refuse workers, employed by the corporation Veolia in Bromley, England, returned a yes vote for industrial action Wednesday over the sacking of four colleagues for alleged gross misconduct, with 81.8 percent voting in favour on a 55 percent turnout.

The workers dismissed by Veolia have more than 100 years of experience between them.

Russian electricity workers hold rally for higher wages, national agreement

On November 15, 180 electricity workers held a rally in central Moscow, demanding higher wages and a national agreement. The action was supported by two pickets and a press conference.

The web site of IndusriALL Global Union said, "The activists of ARETU (or ELECTROPROVSOYUZ) came from all over Russia to hold the rally in downtown Moscow."

The rally adopted a resolution stating, "The managers who account for 10 per cent of the total workforce take 40-50 per cent of the wage budget, and they never forget their own bonuses and premiums. Meanwhile average wages of electricity workers—electricians, electrical fitters, drivers, plant operators—are still very low and stand at US$300-650 per month.

"Currently ARETU demands a 25 per cent increase in real wages. The union is also fighting to maintain the national rate system, which keeps employers from expanding workers' duties without a corresponding raise in wages."

Recently released figures from the Russian statistical authority Rosstat revealed that the average monthly wage in the electricity sector in Russia is 38,000 roubles (US$1,200).

Real wages have remained stagnant for the past decade in the Russian electricity sector while it has undergone constant restructuring, resulting in some operations being outsourced and workload increasing.

Hundreds protest against home-help austerity cuts in Irish town

Around 400 workers protested Sunday in Castlebar, in the county of Mayo, against austerity cuts in the home-help sector.

Castlebar is Taoiseach [Irish head of government] Enda Kenny's hometown.

Among the slogans reported being chanted at the protest were, "Come on Enda, give us a break, all you do is take, take take", and "No ifs, no buts, no home-help cuts."

Neither the Taoiseach nor any of his staff were in the office at the time.

Some of the protesters from Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo, Roscommon and Galway later converged on the Mayo town for the rally.

Teachers in Slovakia in second strike

Teachers in went on strike this week for better working conditions and higher salaries.

Around 80 percent of staff in all schools across the country supported by kindergartens participated, while schools were closed.

It is the second time this school year that teachers in Slovakia have been compelled to take industrial action.

Textile workers in Kenya strike to oppose conditions and pay arrears

Around 1,000 textile workers at the Alpha Knits factory in the town of Ruiru, north of Nairobi, went on strike at the end of last week. They are protesting wage arrears, poor conditions and summary dismissals of work colleagues.

Cleophas Eshiwani, a former chief union steward at the factory, said he was sacked after refusing to take a Sh2000 ($23) bribe if he agreed to keep quiet about the problems workers were raising.

It is reported that national union officials and management met to agree a deal to resolve the dispute but this was rejected by the workforce who complained they had not been consulted.

Lecturers in Tanzania strike over non-payment of salaries

Lecturers at the Dar es Salaam campus of Kampala International University went on strike against the university's decision to pay just 10 months' salaries over a year.

One lecturer explained to the press that it had become a habit of the

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university over the last three years not to pay November and December's salaries.

Nigerian oil workers threaten nationwide strike

The Nigerian Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) have threatened a nationwide strike from today. It is in response to a dispute at Warri and Port Harcourt, where employees were taking strike action to oppose the company's use of casual labour and other unfair work practices.

The union has said it will strike if the government refuses to investigate soldiers who reportedly beat and shot at oil workers picketing the Shell Petroleum Development Company.

Rubber plantation workers strike in Liberia

Rubber plantation workers at the Cocopa rubber plantation in Nimba County in north central Liberia have gone on strike following a "go slow" action. Among the workers' grievances are low pay, lack of basic facilities and inadequate equipment. They have called for government to take over the running of the plantation.

South African food process workers strike

Workers at the County Fair chicken factory at Stellenbosch went on strike last week and picketed the site in pursuit of a wage increase. Their demand is for R1500 ($170) a week. They are currently paid around R500 ($57) a week after deductions.

A striker told the press that the company had bussed in casual workers to try to break the strike. The workers claim company security staff fired on them using paintball guns.

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