

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

8 February 2013

French civil servants in pay strike

Civil servants took nationwide strike action January 31 to oppose the government's austerity programme. It is the first such action by civil servants since the election of President Francois Hollande last year.

The 5 million workers struck in more than 120 towns and cities. They are demanding an end to a pay freeze, increased pay and an equal number of unpaid sick days as private sector employees. Since 2000, the wages of French civil service workers have lost 11 percent of their purchasing power. According to the CGT union, nearly a million civil servants were being paid the minimum wage.

The strike precedes pay talks due this week. Civil Service Minister Marylise Lebranchu has acknowledged "the difficult situation facing civil servants" but said that pay rises were unlikely "given the budgetary constraints on the government."

Many workers on the protest carried homemade banners denouncing the government. PressTV spoke to a protesting worker in Paris who said, "Hollande has been in power for eight months and French workers have seen no difference from the Conservative Sarkozy government." Around 150,000 people participated in demonstrations nationwide, according to union estimates.

Nicolas Baille, the secretary general of the CGT Equipment-Environment Union, claimed that the government of Hollande would accede to workers' demands, stating, "We are not ignorant of our nation's bad economic situation and budget constraints. But the unions have a very clear idea about how to distribute our nation's wealth and we are waiting for the socialists to act".

Spanish students strike against education cuts

Public high school students throughout Spain joined the second day of a three-day strike called by the Students' Union (SE) this week, against huge government cuts in education.

Almost 2 million students have been called to join the strike convened by the SE and backed by the Spanish Confederation of Associations of Students' Fathers and Mothers (CEAPA).

Around 80 percent of students supported the strike, according to union sources, especially from institutes in Madrid, Valencia, Andalusia, Extremadura, Aragon and Asturias. This is estimated to be a higher participation rate than on the first protest on October 16, 2012.

The protests have also been animated by opposition to the corruption scandals throughout official Spanish politics, particularly in the Popular Party of the current prime minister, Mariano Rajoy.

Iberia airline staff set to strike over planned lay-offs in Spain

Ground staff and cabin crew at Spain's Iberia airline are scheduled for 15 days of strikes to oppose the company's plans to lay off 4,500 workers. The stoppages by Iberia staff will be held February 18-22, March 4-8 and March 18-22.

The trade unions involved called off a week of strikes in December on the pretext of continuing negotiations.

International Airlines Group—which includes British Airways and Iberia—announced a plan last year to cut 23 percent of the Spanish company's staff, saying the carrier was "in a fight for survival."

Cypriot police clash with striking builders

On Tuesday, police clashed with striking builders in Paphos, Cyprus, who had attempted to stop strike-breakers being brought in to take over work at a hotel construction site.

Construction workers have been striking over job losses and insecurity in the sector.

Three people were arrested during the clashes, which ensued after around 50 scabs tried to enter the site, which was being guarded by construction workers on day nine of an island-wide strike.

The *Cyprus Mail* reported, "Television footage showed one police officer shouting abuse at the striking builders as he moved to push them out of the way. Another officer used pepper spray against builders who were trying to prevent him from making an arrest, police said."

A man was treated in hospital for breathing problems and was later released.

The unions accused police of using excessive force. "The police tried to disperse strikers violently and with excessive zeal," Pancyprian Federation of Labour representative Neophytos Assos said. Assos also charged that police officers had provoked striking workers, telling them they did not know how to hold a strike properly.

Guardian and Observer journalists vote for strike in UK

Journalists working on the *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers voted overwhelmingly for industrial action this week over compulsory redundancies. Guardian News & Media insists it needs to cut 100 editorial posts as part of a plan to make £7 million savings to its annual budget.

More than 80 percent of reporters voted to strike over the redundancies and to defend existing terms and conditions at the two papers.

million in 2011-2012, the IPO is prohibited from using these profits to pay staff.

Scottish Police catering staff in overtime ban

Catering staff employed by Sodexo, at the Tulliallan Police College in Fife, are to go on industrial action over low pay.

The workers, at the new single Scottish Police Force's HQ and Police training college, are to go on an immediate overtime ban following a ballot this week. The ballot unanimously rejected a much-delayed pay offer of 1 percent with a 1.5 percent supplement from November—seven months after the pay anniversary date. The vast majority of the predominantly female staff are on a minimum rate of just £6.37 an hour, and a claim is being made for the so-called Scottish Living Wage of £7.20.

UK Post Office counter workers to be balloted for industrial action

Post Office counter workers in the UK are to be balloted for industrial action over pay and job security. The staff are members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU).

“After having been kept waiting since April 2012 for a pay rise, staff were last week presented with an offer of fully taxable but unconsolidated lump sums over the next three years tied to acceptance of a ‘Transformation plan’, which could see up to one-fifth of the network cut,” said a statement on the CWU’s web site.

Whilst approving a ballot for industrial action, the union’s main concern is that it is not being consulted over the specific changes being imposed by the Post Office. On Tuesday, CWU assistant secretary Andy Furey stated, “Post Office bosses are basically demanding that we sign up, in advance, to their ‘Transformation’ plan without us even knowing all the details of it.

“For example, they say they want to franchise ‘up to 70’ crowns [Post Office branches directly managed by Post Office Ltd], but they can’t even tell us which ones. And they call for a ‘more flexible combination of full and part-time roles’ but again, they’re not being specific.”

The CWU has demanded further talks with Furey, adding, “I have this evening written to Post Office chief executive Paul Vennells advising her [sic] of today’s development and making clear that, unless there is an urgent change of course, strikes may become inevitable.”

Since 2001, some 45,000 jobs have been slashed from Royal Mail, and its workers remain among the poorest paid in the UK. These devastating attacks have been imposed in collaboration with the CWU and its self-proclaimed “left” leadership of General Secretary Billy Hayes and Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward.

Workers at UK government patents strike, work-to-rule over pay

Workers at the government’s patents office are expected to stage a half-day strike today, followed by a work-to-rule for the rest of the month, in a pay dispute.

The staff work at the Intellectual Property Office (IPO), which is one of a number of Trading Fund agencies, such as the Royal Mint, Ordnance Survey and HM Land Registry.

Despite reporting surpluses of £8.5 million in 2010-2011 and £10.8

UK: Cleaning workers demonstrate for a living wage at London Barbican Centre

Cleaning workers staged a protest at the City of London Corporation’s prestige arts facility, the Barbican Centre, last week to demand to be paid a “living wage”.

The protest was organised by the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), which declared an official dispute at the Barbican last November and has since held several protests.

The City of London Corporation has officially agreed to the living wage (currently £8.55 an hour in the capital), but it outsources the cleaning to the company MITIE, which pays its CEO more than a million pounds a year. The cleaners are paid just £6.90 an hour, under £11,000 per year.

Workers at Egypt’s Sokhna Port in strike over contract dispute with DP World

Almost 1,200 workers at Egypt’s Sokhna Port are striking in a contract dispute with DP World. The workers are employed by Platinum Maritime Services, a subcontractor at the seaport. They are demanding full-time contracts with DP World, which manages the port.

The ongoing strike has halted the port’s operations. The strike is the latest in a series that workers holding temporary contracts have staged since October to demand employment contracts with the Dubai-based corporation DP World.

The dispute escalated following the decision by DP World management at the end of last year to end its service contract with Platinum Maritime Services, ending its temporary contracts with the subcontractor’s employees.

Earlier, the Red Sea Port Authority announced it had reached an agreement with DP World to employ almost 1,200 workers of various subcontracting companies that had served the seaport in cooperation with DP World. The proposal, however, was rejected by the workers’ independent syndicate.

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

Egyptian youth protest against unemployment and corruption

On Tuesday, young demonstrators protested at the South Sinai Governorate headquarters against unemployment, nepotism and unfair land pricing, saying they were taking jobs away from young people. Others joined in and blocked the main road linking Cairo and Sharm El-Sheikh.

“Youth cannot get jobs or even [start] projects,” said one protester, Talat Mubarak.

A report by *Al-Masry Al-Youm* stated, “Security forces surrounded the building to prevent protesters from storming governorate offices. Later, they evacuated employees who were having difficulty breathing due to the heavy tire smoke.

“...Protesters also threatened to gather at the Sharm El-Sheikh

International Airport should the governor ignore their demands.”

Jerusalem after-school staff go on strike over wages and conditions

School staff who run after-school activities in Jerusalem, Israel, went on strike this week to protest against wage reductions and worsening conditions, recently brought about by the implementation of new reforms.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, “The Trajtenberg Committee, appointed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu following the summer 2011 social justice protests, decided to lower the cost of after-school programs in order to ease the situation of working parents. The reform was implemented last month in Jerusalem as part of a pilot for the project, requested by the municipality.

“In the process, the staff at these programs have been switched over from a global salary to an hourly one, resulting in a reduction of their pay.”

Dozens of educators also resigned on Sunday, saying that they could no longer afford to work under the new conditions.

More than 100 educators and parents gathered in Safra Square in Jerusalem last week to demonstrate against the change with the slogan, “Cheaper the after-school activities, keep working conditions.”

Union warns South African miners against “unreachable” pay demands

The South African National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has issued a statement calling on miners to moderate their pay demands this year. The NUM is holding a two-day bargaining conference in Midrand to prepare wage negotiations in the gold and coal sectors.

The NUM deputy president, Piet Matosa, stated: “It is going to be very difficult for the NUM in some regions to talk to members to get a mandate...bargaining is one of the recruitment tools that we should use to win mineworkers...the mandate-seeking process must not be compromised.” He went on to say the union had to manage the expectations of its members.

Last August, 34 platinum miners were killed by police when taking wildcat strike action at the Lonmin mine against low pay and appalling living conditions. The attack on the miners, which sparked mass nationwide strikes and protests, was sanctioned by the ruling ANC government and its partners including the NUM.

Kenyan flower workers’ strike

More than 2,000 workers at the Panda and Star flower farms in Naivasha, in the Rift Valley northwest of Nairobi came out on strike last Friday. They were protesting the injury of fellow workers when the car giving them a lift to their workplace went off the road. Ten of them were seriously injured and had to be admitted to hospital.

The secretary of the Kenya Plantations and Agricultural Workers Union, representing the workers, Ferdinand Juma, explained to the press that the union has previously called on management at the farms to provide transport. Failure by the employers to provide transport means workers have to hitch rides to get to work, leading to overloaded unsafe conditions.

Kenyan port of Mombasa brought to a standstill

A strike by around 1,500 middle managers and department heads at the port of Mombasa in Kenya on Monday brought all operations to a halt. The managers worked in the operations, engineering, health and tagging departments.

The managers are seeking a 100 percent pay increase, against the offer by the employer, the Kenya Port Authority (KPA), of between 30 and 85 percent. The government promised last December to bring their wages in line with those of managers in other parastatal organisations.

Strike of Kenyan nurses enters third month

The strike by around 2,000 nurses, which began December 3, has entered its third month. They are seeking registration of their union, the Kenya National Union of Nurses (KNUN). A court order January 11 instructed the government to begin meaningful negotiations, but so far it has failed to do so.

KNUN is demanding the withdrawal of dismissal letters and accuses the Ministry of Medical Services of intimidation of its members.



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