

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

15 February 2013

Steelworkers at European plants of ArcelorMittal strike to protest job losses

Workers at several European plants of ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steelmaker, took strike action Wednesday to protest job losses planned in four countries. At least 3,500 jobs are set to go at plants in France, Belgium, Spain and Luxembourg. The firm employs nearly 100,000 workers in Europe.

The European Metalworkers Federation said, strikes "ranging from two hours per shift to a 24 hour walkout" were held in Belgium, France and Luxembourg.

A spokesman for the BBTK trade union in Belgium said 40,000 people protested at a demonstration in the town of Liege on Wednesday. He commented, "There are not just steelworkers here today, there are also workers from other sectors, both industry and services, who are on strike. All shops in the city centre are closed out of solidarity with the workers of ArcelorMittal."

ArcelorMittal claimed the 24-hour strikes were limited to plants in Luxembourg, Belgium and one in France.

ArcelorMittal plans would permanently end liquid-phase steel production at its Liege plant, citing overcapacity and a slow recovery in the European market. Blast furnaces in Florange in France and Eisenhuettenstadt in Germany have also been idled.

ArcelorMittal has refused to postpone the cuts after requests for negotiations from the European Commission, alarmed at the social unrest they will provoke. On Wednesday, Nicola Davidson, a spokeswoman for the firm said, "Continuing to operate these plants would threaten the overall viability of our business in Europe. We are a public company. We are responsible to our shareholders."

Another of the world's main steel producers, German owned ThyssenKrupp, is also imposing thousands of job cuts. Last week the firm said around 2,000 jobs would be lost among its 27,600 Steel Europe workforce. ThyssenKrupp intends to reduce its costs by €500 million as part of a €2 billion restructuring programme to be completed by 2015.

In November, 900 job losses were announced by Tata Steel in the UK.

Tens of thousands protest against austerity in Ireland

On Saturday tens of thousands of people demonstrated throughout Ireland against the austerity measures being imposed by the Fine Gael-Labour coalition government. Protests took place in the country's main towns and cities including Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick, Sligo and Waterford. According to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), who called the protests, up to 60,000 attended the Dublin event, whilst the Irish police claimed 25,000 turned out. Thousands attended demonstrations in

Cork and Sligo while smaller protests were held in Limerick, Galway and Waterford. The ICTU said over 110,000 protested nationally.

The protests were called under the slogan of "Lift the Burden".

Last week, the government concluded an agreement with the European Central Bank to restructure Ireland's debt. The restructuring means that the Irish population will take on responsibility for paying an even greater proportion of bank debt, which will be extracted through decades of austerity.

The coalition is currently in negotiations with the unions to secure a further €1 billion in spending cuts before 2015. As a result of the austerity measures already imposed, 360,000 jobs have been destroyed and each man, woman and child saddled with a debt burden almost €9,000.

SABIC chemical workers strike at plant in Netherlands

On February 6, workers at Saudi Basic Industries Corp (SABIC) Europe Chemicals' Netherlands based Geleen plant ended a strike. According to the company, the strike began on January 31, "due to the proactive measure taken by the union workforce as a consequence of no finalised agreement regarding work conditions".

The workers are members of the De Unie trade union and the strike is reportedly centred on the issue of support and payments to staff who may be laid off in the future.

SABIC is the largest petrochemical maker in the world and operates two naphtha crackers and a number of polymerization plants at Geleen. These produce 1.25 million tons of ethylene, 940,000 tons of polyethylene, 725,000 tons of propylene and 620,000 tons of polypropylene per annum.

Italian gynaecologists and midwives strike to protest austerity cuts

On Tuesday, gynaecologists and midwives struck to protest the austerity programme of the government of Prime Minister Mario Monti.

The one-day strike by members of the Italian Association of Hospital Obstetricians and Gynaecologists closed the majority of the country's hospital delivery rooms.

The €25 billion austerity cuts being imposed by the government are having a devastating impact on health care. According to estimates they will result in a shortage of 30,000 doctors in the next four years. Some €600 million is to be slashed from the health budget in 2013 and €1 billion in 2014.

Primary school teachers in England strike against constant observation regulations

Teachers at a primary school Newton-le-Willows, in Merseyside, England struck for two days this week to protest new performance management procedures. The workers are opposed to the system which allows head teachers to monitor lessons on an unlimited number of occasions.

The teachers are members of the NASUWT trade union and staged a previous strike in the dispute on February 5.

The new monitoring regime is part of the Conservative/Liberal coalition governments 2012 School Teacher Appraisal Regulations.

BBC journalists set to strike against job losses

Journalists employed by the UK's state broadcaster, the BBC, are to strike for 24 hours on February 18 in a dispute over job losses. As part of its Delivering Quality First (DQF), the BBC plans to shed more than 2,000 job losses over the next five years. Under DQF, 1,400 news posts have already been cut, on top of the 7,000 jobs that have gone at the BBC since 2004.

The workers are members of the National Union of Journalists who are to begin a work to rule today.

The NUJ members were balloted for industrial action before Christmas in opposition to around 30 compulsory redundancies, affecting areas including BBC Scotland, the Asian Network, the World Service and English regions.

Airline workers strike Oman Air

Workers at Oman's flagship airline struck at Muscat International Airport, to protest management reneging on promises made in November.

The leader of the airport employees union, Saleh Bin Mohammad Abdullah Al Zedjali, said that workers "had been demanding training and promotions for Omani staff for some time but, despite promises, the company had not implemented any of the demands". He also said that employees were being made to work more than eight hours by the airline without being paid overtime wages.

Other grievances are over long hours and late nights, which even women are forced to work. The union alleges that the company deducts pay even when employees submitted legitimate medical bills and that it had been withholding increments.

Teachers and civil servants set to strike in Lebanon

Teachers and civil servants are set to strike indefinitely on February 19 in Lebanon. The workers are protesting to demand the implementation of the new public sector salary scale.

The workers are members of the Union Coordination Committee, comprising public and private teachers, as well as civil servants. Another trade union involved is the Public Sector Employees Committee.

The Beirut Chamber of Commerce has demanded the government refuse

to award pay increases, claiming pay increases would cost around \$1.2 billion and workers, "have to understand that the new scale can be postponed until the economic and fiscal situation improves".

Kenyan nurses end long-running strike

Nurses in Kenya ended a two-month strike on February 11. Their strike which began on December 3 was to demand recognition of their union, the Kenya National Union of Nurses (KNUN) and payment of outstanding allowances. The action affected most of the public hospitals in Kenya which were only able to operate a much reduced service.

In December, the government declared the strike illegal and issued dismissal notices to some of the nurses involved. Under an agreement to end the dispute, the government said there would be no victimisations and that all nurses should report back to their previous positions and would receive their December and January salaries.

However, the Ministry of Labour said it will not recognise the KNUN. It will continue to recognise the Union of Kenya Civil Servants (UKCS) as the only body representing the nurses. The nurses had joined the KNUN accusing the UKCS of failing to represent their interests.

Doctors' strike in Ghana

Doctors in Ghana represented by the Ghana Medical Association (GMA) struck on Monday in pursuit of a wage claim. The GMA suspended the strike Wednesday, pending the outcome of negotiations between itself, the National Labour Commission and the Fair Wages and Salaries Commission.

GMA president Dr Opoku Adusei said the strike would recommence if the talks did not resolve the dispute.

Liberian beach cleaners threaten go-slow action

Around 800 contractors taken on by the Liberian Maritime Authority (LMA) have threatened to stage protests and a go-slow action if they are not paid the three month's salary arrears they are owed. The contractors are paid \$US60 and supervisors \$US105 a month. They were given three year contracts which should have run till 2014.

They are employed to clean up rubbish and pollution from Liberia's beaches and are also protesting the LMA's intention to shorten the promised three year contracts.

South African Airways strike for union recognition

Workers at South African Airways (SAA) have gone on strike to demand recognition of their union, the National Transport Movement (NTM). The strike began January 18. On January 22, 500 workers from SAA Technical joined the strike in sympathy action.

On Sunday the NTM said the action would continue until the union was recognised.

According to the NTM secretary general, Craig Nte, the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration are currently verifying the number of NTM members at SAA and that the strike will continue until the verification is complete and the union recognised.

The NTM split from the Congress of South African Trade Unions-affiliated South African Transport and Allied Workers Union and began campaigning for recognition at SAA last year.

A similar strike is also taking place by Metrorail workers demanding that the Passenger Rail Agency of SA recognise the NTM.

South African mortuary workers strike over hazardous work conditions

Around 50 forensic pathology officers working at the Magwaza Maphalala (Gale) Street mortuary in Durban have gone on strike. This has led to bodies piling up at the mortuary and at surrounding hospitals that the mortuary serves. The workers, represented by the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU), have accused the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health of failing to uphold occupational health and safety regulations.

They say refrigerators that are used to hold the bodies are not working properly and the bodies are beginning to decompose and cause noxious smells. In addition they do not have protective clothing to prevent blood and water splashes from bodies spraying on them when cleaning the bodies.



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