

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

1 March 2013

## Europe

### Belgian workers protest austerity programme

On February 21 around 30,000 protested in Brussels, Belgium against the government's austerity programme. The demonstration was supported by many public-sector workers and brought public transport in the capital to a halt.

Demonstrations were held in other Belgian cities including Liège, where a delegation of steelworkers who are fighting the plans by ArcelorMittal to close their plant, attended.

The demonstration was called by a number of trade unions. The government is seeking to cut spending by €3.7 billion (\$4.74 billion) in 2013 in order to slash its deficit to 2.15 percent of output during the year. Cuts being imposed by the government include wage cuts, wage freezes, cuts in unemployment allowances and tax rises.

Many on the demonstrations chanted anti-government slogans. One worker told the media, "The people who are here are asking for proper, honest and well paid jobs. All the workers say is: 'no to discrimination'."

Workers at Belgium's main broadcaster showed their support for the protests by delaying the morning news programmes.

### Steel workers strike ILVA steel plant in Taranto, Italy in ongoing dispute

On February 18, rail workers at the ILVA steel plant in the southern Italian port city of Taranto began strike action. The workers were protesting safety and security issues arising from a November 2010 restructuring at the factory.

Last July, the workers took industrial action to protest a court order to shut down its smelting facilities and mineral park, on the basis of environmental concerns. The health of local residents was being affected by toxic dust and other elements that were produced by the plant, according to the court.

In October, an investigation was launched after a 29-year-old worker at the plant was found dead near a locomotive engine.

On Thursday, another worker was killed and one more injured. Ciro Moccia, 42, died after falling from the loading ramps of a battery of coke ovens. The other worker, Antonio Liddi, sustained serious injuries.

Following the latest death, several trade unions called for a 24-hour strike. Marco Bentivoglio, the leader of Italy's Fim Cisl union said: "After some years in which there were no more lethal accidents, the three deaths in recent months are serious and unacceptable."

## Electricity workers demonstrate in Moscow for higher pay

On February 20 hundreds of Russian electricity workers gathered in central Moscow in pursuit of a 25 percent pay increase and to protest a lack of proper equipment repair and increasing workloads. The workers are members of the All-Russian Electric Trade Union (ARETU). The union is currently negotiating a national collective agreement for 2013 with the employers' association.

Despite government claims that workers earn an equivalent to \$1,300 a month, wages have fallen by up to 40 percent over recent years. Average wages of electricity workers in Russia are the equivalent of just \$500-800.

### Steel workers at Hungary's largest plant begin indefinite strike

Workers at ISD Dunafer Zrt, the largest Hungarian steel plant began an indefinite strike February 20. According to the *steeltguru* web site, "Employees and the management failed to reach an agreement at steel maker ISD Dunafer Zrt, leading workers to declare a strike of indefinite duration..."

The steel workers are demanding a pay increase of at least 5 percent to keep track with inflation. The firm is only offering a 3.5 percent deal, after initially offering just 2.1 percent.

Dunafer Zrt. employs more than 7,000 workers and is a subsidiary of the Ukrainian holding company Industrial Union of Donbass.

### College lecturers in Scotland begin industrial action in ongoing pay dispute

Dozens of lecturers at a college at Reid Kerr College, Paisley, began industrial action Wednesday in an ongoing dispute in support of a pay claim.

Union representatives say they have been unable to persuade management to make any offer to staff on pay. The college management refused to table a new pay offer ahead of today's strike.

Further Education (FE) colleges in Scotland have seen £50 million a year slashed from their budgets and 1,000 lecturers' posts have been cut in the last year.

Earlier this month, the Scottish Finance Secretary John Swinney agreed to a £61m deal over three years to offset FE college cuts in previous budgets, but critics say overall cuts to the sector will still amount to nearly £50m a year.

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) has warned that "sustained

industrial action” could threaten plans to merge Reid Kerr College with two other colleges in the west of Scotland (Clydebank and James Watt College) under a Scottish government policy to slim down the number of FE institutions and college places north of the border.

### **BBC staff to be balloted for further industrial action against restructuring plan**

BBC staff are to be balloted for industrial action over compulsory redundancies, workload, stress and bullying and harassment—resulting from the corporation’s “Delivering Quality First” (DQF) cost-cutting agenda.

The industrial ballot closes March 20 and could lead to disruption of television and radio schedules over the Easter period.

A 24-hour strike by BBC journalists took place February 18, disrupting radio and TV news programmes across the network. Some journalists mounted picket lines outside BBC offices and studios across the UK.

Under DQF the BBC is to cut its budget by 20 percent, resulting in 2,000 job losses, many from core programming. The corporation has already cut over 7,000 jobs since 2004.

### **Teachers in Stoke on Trent, England begin industrial action**

Staff at the Mount Education Support Centre in Stoke on Trent began the first of five days of industrial action Wednesday over what they say is “punitive” management imposed on special needs teachers in the city.

The strike is the latest in a series of local disputes across England challenging the imposition of performance management and increases in classroom workloads for teachers.

### **Staff at London Overground set for further action**

Safety and security staff at London Overground are to take further industrial action in response to the company reneging on a promised settlement.

The dispute also concerns issues of bullying, harassment and attempts to impose workplace changes without agreement.

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) suspended strike action in December for promises of talks by management. Since then it has refused to meet with RMT. **Middle East**

### **Egyptian workers protest fuel shortages, tax and price rises**

The *Daily News Egypt* reported Tuesday on a series of strikes and protests across Egypt triggered by a combination of recent fuel shortages, tax increases and price increases.

“Workers have been demanding permanent working contracts, while protesting price hikes and fuel shortages at the same time, many companies and factories have suspended operations while others have shut down due to the ongoing labour strikes and the unprecedented losses,” said the paper.

“Workers are waiting for the government to address their problems and listen to their demands, but to no avail,” one union official told *Daily News Egypt*.

The Suez Cement Company, The Suez Canal Authority, Portland Cement Company, Misr Beni Suez Cement Company, Platinum Company, The Investment Authority, Faragalla, among others, have all suspended operations, according to the paper.

Hundreds of workers in the Nile Delta also blocked main routes and railways into the industrial city of Mahalla.

### **Car workers take protest of unpaid wages to Ankara and Istanbul**

Unpaid workers who stopped production at BMC, the maker of Turkey’s Kirpi brand armoured carriers, on February 1 in the western province of Izmir, took their protest to Ankara and Istanbul on Tuesday.

Around 1,200 BMC workers have not received wages since May 2012. One group of these workers is to continue to protest in front of the Parliament building in Ankara while another group will protest in front of the Istanbul headquarters of Çukurova Holding, BMC’s parent company.

The total workforce at BMC is 1,650. BMC is one of the largest commercial vehicle manufacturers in Turkey. The company was formed in 1964 in partnership with the British Motor Corporation (also known as BMC) in Izmir. **Africa**

### **South African construction workers’ continue strike**

The strike by construction workers working on the Eskom-owned Medupi power station in Limpopo has now lasted six weeks. They began the strike on January 16 over a dispute about payment of end-of-year bonuses.

They are working on the construction of the new power station at Medupi. Amongst the construction companies at the site are Hitachi Power Africa and Alstom. The workers are represented by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA).

NUMSA met with its members last weekend with a view to getting an agreement to return to work. However, the workers have resolved not to return to work if they are required to sign a peace agreement. Signing such an agreement, they argue, would mean they would face a final warning for participating in an unprotected strike (as defined by the Labour Relations Act). They will only return to work on an unconditional basis.

They are due to meet again with union representatives this coming weekend.

### **Nigerian Teaching hospital workers’ strike**

Federal health workers at the Obafemi Awolowo University Teaching hospital went on strike last Friday. Their main demand was for the implementation of the report on harmonisation and for health professionals currently on CONHESS point 14 to be promoted to point 15.

Most of the patients were discharged home prior to the strike with doctors providing a skeletal service to those remaining.

## Construction workers' strike at Ghanaian Sofoline Interchange

Construction workers working on a major road interchange project at the Sofoline Interchange at Kwadaso in Kumasi, Ghana went on strike Tuesday. They were protesting the failure of the Chinese management to pay an agreed salary increase. They were also protesting lack of job security with some saying they have worked on the project for four years without being given appointment letters.

The project, which began in 2007, is being undertaken by the Chinese Geo Corporation. It has been subjected to many delays and the workers have taken action several times in an attempt to defend their wages and conditions.

At the commencement of the strike they held a protest at the construction site, resulting in police being called.



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