

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

29 March 2013

Italian transit workers strike for 24 hours

A 24-hour strike by Italian transit workers March 22, over demands for the renewal of contracts, halted 75 percent of the country's public transportation, according to an ANSA report.

The workers say the absence of a national agreement that regulates the employer-employee relation is harming them. The striking workers were also protesting government austerity measures.

The transport union FILT-CGIL reported that 60 percent of buses in Rome were halted, 80 percent in the Piedmont city of Turin and 90 percent in the southern city of Naples. In Venice, 60 percent of water transport stopped.

Also, 70 percent of public buses were out of service in the Sicilian city of Palermo. Around 90 percent of buses did not run in Bari, the capital of Puglia.

Pilots and cabin crew at the national airline Alitalia held a four-hour stoppage the same day, over concerns about the company's outsourcing policies that the ANPAC, AVIA and ANPAV trade unions say leave pilots and flight attendants with "no guarantees about their future employment". The unions are also in dispute with management over the terms and conditions at the Alitalia Cityliner operation.

Thousands of workers in Poland strike against government policies

Around 90,000 workers in the industrial region in Silesia, Poland staged industrial action Tuesday to protest the government's labour, health, education and economic policies, demanding higher wages, an improvement of job security and better work contracts for employees.

Most affected by the strikes was Katowice and the area nearby in southwest Poland. The strike included workers at steel mills, mines, railways and power plants as well as teachers, bus and tram drivers and employees from the health care sector.

The transport system was brought to a halt. Around 20 hospitals experienced a work-to-rule by staff.

Romanian steel workers protest over layoffs after corporate takeover

On Monday, hundreds of Romanian steel workers protested against layoffs at steel plants that were sold last month by the Russian firm Mechel to a small company.

"Over 200 former employees of Mechel Campia Turzii in northern Romania on Monday staged protests for the third week in a row outside

their old factory, demanding the compensation packages promised by the new owner of the factory, Invest Nikarom," reported balkaninsight.com.

One protester was quoted by the news sources as saying: "We are desperate. Last week we got only a quarter of the money from the compensation package and don't understand why the managers are delaying payments. We are calling on the government to organize a meeting with the new owner to save our jobs."

Invest Nikarom recently took over Mechel's four factories in Romania for a symbolic \$70. Production was then halted with the new owner announcing that most jobs will be lost.

Renault Romania workers in pay strike

On March 21, hundreds of auto workers at Renault's Dacia car plant in Romania struck for higher pay. The workers said that their demands for a wage increase had not been included in the collective work contract, and complained of the short time in which they have to produce a car—just 40 seconds.

The employees reportedly asked Renault management for a RON 500 pay rise per employee—around €113—and the management's refusal triggered the protest. The average salary of a worker in the Dacia factory was of RON 2,900 per month, gross salary, around €880.

The company claimed that the action was illegal, as the number of protesters was below 20 percent of the company's staff, and that they will not be paid for the missed work.

A report by *Romania-Insider.com* said that the "Employees Union also confirmed that the protest was illegal." The disowning of the strike by the union is on a par with its previous role in agreeing with Renault's restructuring strategy, which enables the automaker to eliminate 7,500 jobs in France by 2016 through attrition, freeze wages this year and increase the number of weekly working hours from 32 to 35. These changes are expected to lead to company savings of around €500 billion.

The Dacia Duster model represents around half of the daily production of the Dacia factory in Mioveni, Romania. The carmaker produces around 1,400 vehicles a day in the Romanian factory, which has around 8,000 employees. Dacia is Romania's largest exporter and accounts for almost 3 percent of its gross domestic product, with 90 percent of its output being sold abroad.

BBC journalists and technicians strike over jobs

BBC staff, who are members of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and Bectu, conducted a 12-hour strike from midday Thursday in an

ongoing dispute over compulsory redundancies, workload, stress and allegations of bullying and harassment—resulting from the corporation’s “Delivering Quality First” (DQF) cost-cutting agenda.

The action follows a previous 24-hour strike held by members of the NUJ on February 18. The strike was expected to hit the programming schedule including news bulletins. The Thursday edition of the BBC flagship news programme *Newsnight* has been cancelled, with a replacement show yet to be confirmed.

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.

The trade unions have not opposed the job cuts outright, merely calling for a six-month moratorium on further job losses, closures, and a review of workplace issues.

Commenting on the latest strike, Michelle Stanistreet, general secretary of the NUJ, called for the BBC to engage in further talks, “It is disappointing that once again the BBC has decided not to properly engage, refusing our call for a moratorium to give space for meaningful discussions on the worrying impact of the cuts”.

Gerry Morrissey, general secretary of Bectu, said, “The BBC has a duty of care which it is not exercising currently and it is great pity that strike action is needed to make senior managers take the issues seriously.”

The BBC said “constructive meetings” had been held with the trade unions in recent weeks, but its position on compulsory redundancies remained unchanged. “We must progress with those given the significant savings we have to make and strike action simply will not change this”, a spokesman added.

Greek students protest austerity measures on education

On March 21, students gathered in front of the Greek parliament in central Athens, amid heavy police presence, to protest the effects the government’s austerity measures are having on education. The protests are the latest in a series of national actions against the “Athina Plan”, under which the coalition government plans to merge or close a number of higher education faculties in the new academic year.

Students at technical colleges, or TEI, in Athens and Thessaloniki are also to stage protests this week against plans to overhaul the country’s higher education system that have come under fire from many academics.

The plans include the shutting down of four universities—the University of Central Greece, the University of Western Greece, the International Hellenic University and the University of Western Macedonia—and the closure of dozens of departments at universities and technical colleges.

As a result of the mass austerity imposed by successive governments, Greece is experiencing its sixth year of recession. Young people have been particularly affected, as more than 60 percent are currently unemployed.

Verdi ensures no Easter strike action in ongoing Lufthansa dispute

On March 22 the Verdi trade union in Germany, representing 33,000 cabin crew and ground staff at the flagship Lufthansa airline, ruled out any strike action over the Easter holiday.

The workers are involved in an ongoing dispute with the company in pursuit of a 5.2 percent pay rise and a commitment to safeguard jobs. Staff involved in the dispute are employed by Lufthansa Cargo, Lufthansa

Technik, Lufthansa Systems, catering unit LSG Sky Chefs and ground crews.

The cancellation of strikes over Easter follows a strike on March 21 during which the airline was forced to cancel close to 40 percent of its flights.

Verdi said no action would be held over the busy Easter period despite no agreement being reached in talks with management, with the union saying Lufthansa’s offers so far have been “far apart”. The airline said it wants to freeze wages and ask employees to work one hour more per week in an effort to compete with its rivals.

Further talks are scheduled for April 17.

UK postal workers set to strike over jobs, pay, shop closures

Around 4,000 postal staff in the UK are to strike March 30 (Easter Saturday) in a dispute over jobs, pay and shop closures. The staff working at 373 Crown—or main—offices, handling 20 percent of all Post Office business, will be striking against plans to close and franchise Crown offices.

The Communication Workers Union said 88 percent of its members had voted in favour of industrial action.

Last month, the Post Office announced it wanted to close up to 70 Crown offices and replace them with franchises based in other shops. Crown office counter staff have not had a wage increase since 2011.

Derry City Council staff in Ireland protest restructuring

Derry City Council staff in Ireland held a protest Monday over plans to restructure jobs within the council’s museum and Guildhall divisions. According to the NIPSA trade union, 30 workers have been put on notice of redundancy.

Derry City Council Chief Executive, Sharon O’Connor said, “I’m really disappointed that the process is being characterised in this way. This is a really good news story.”

Egyptian media workers protest

State Radio and Television Union employees in Egypt staged protests outside at Maspero Nile Corniche Wednesday, demanding payment of unpaid wages in full and the dismissal of Information Minister Salah Abdel Maqsood, who “they claim is a Muslim Brotherhood sympathizer,” according to *Egypt Independent*.

The protesting workers briefly blocked traffic on the busy corniche.

“The minister of information and the ruling administration restrict us”, said presenter Doaa Abdel Meguid. Referring to accusations that state broadcasters are not defending the Muslim Brotherhood against critics, she added: “We are accused of being biased.”

South African Post Office dismisses workers involved in illegal strike

The 588 post office workers at the Witspos mail distribution centre in Johannesburg, who have been taking part in illegal strike action for the past six weeks, have been dismissed by their employer, the South African Post Office (SAPO).

Around 500 of the strikers met with Congress of South African Trades Unions (COSATU) President Sdumo Dlamini in an effort to resolve the dispute. They are seeking reinstatement of money they claim is owed them. Throughout the dispute the workers opposed the involvement of their own union, the Communications Workers Union (CWU) or COSATU.

SAPO claim no money is owed to the workers, that the workers were subject to a scam and that a post office employee had been arrested. SAPO stated: "The strike originated from misinformation by some employees who wanted to extort money from unsuspecting employees."

However workers still insist they are owed money. Speaking to the press, one worker, Denzil Hollande told reporters: "We are not getting it from the trees; we saw the documents, the documents directly from the court. We are not making it up." He added that a union representative had informed them of outstanding payments from 2010 that were due to them and that they had asked the union to follow it up, but when it failed to do so they began their own strike action.

The strike has led to a huge backlog of undelivered mail, currently standing at 15 days worth. SAPO is using mail couriers to deliver some of the backlog.

South African power station construction stopped by new dispute

Construction workers at the site of the Eskom Medupi, dry-cooled coal fired power station in Limpopo are again on strike.

The workers returned to work two weeks ago in a settlement that included a one-off R2000 (US\$216) payment and access to interest-free loans.

According to National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the 2,000 workers who went on strike this week are not their members.

Democratic Alliance spokeswoman, Natasha Michael, has called for a permanent mediation and negotiation team, staffed by Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration members, to be set up at the construction site.

Eskom is anxious the power station be completed and to come on stream to prevent possible power outages.



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