

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

5 April 2013

Teachers strike in Denmark after contract talks break down

On Tuesday, teachers protested throughout Denmark after they were locked out in a dispute over working hours. The lockout occurred after the teachers union and the local government association failed to agree a new collective bargaining agreement by April 1.

The lockout affected some 50,000 teachers who teach more than 600,000 students who had returned to school following the Easter holiday.

Under their old contract, teachers in Denmark have a 25-hour teaching limit. The Kommunernes landsforening local government association wants this limit to be terminated and to leave it up to schools to determine the number of hours worked.

If the dispute is not resolved, upcoming exams in May and oral exams in June are expected to be disrupted.

Ground handlers walk out at Portugal's national airline

Portugal's national airline, TAP, announced it was cancelling flights between the mainland and the Azores today and Sunday, due to a strike by ground handlers.

In a statement, it said that, due to a strike by employees of the ground-handling unit of Azores regional airline, SATA, it had been forced to cancel all flights.

SATA employees are taking action to protest cuts in overtime and holiday pay, which they say violates existing accords between the company and its workers.

Greek transportation workers in 24-hour protest

A 24-hour strike took place amongst ship and ferry workers Wednesday against the abolition of collective labor agreements that protect wages and benefits. The contracts were in force before the present economic crisis. Staff are also opposed to changes in the structure of public seafaring.

Workers on the public railways also struck from Wednesday to Friday in opposition to the transfer of the ownership of TRAINOSE (the company that manages the public railways) to the Privatization Agency.

Greek doctors demand unpaid wages

Doctors held a 24-hour strike March 28 demanding payment of unpaid wages, as well as calling attention to personnel shortages in public hospitals. The doctors highlighted the fact that 150 Intensive Care Units remain closed, and that this was "risking human lives."

Some of the protesting doctors from public hospitals in Athens and Piraeus also rallied outside the health ministry building.

Students occupy Patras city hall in Greece

University students have occupied Patras city hall in protest of the planned overhaul of the university system as part of the Athena plan.

On Thursday, the Greek parliament voted for the plan, aimed at the destruction of free state-provided higher education. The law was rammed through in flagrant violation of the Greek constitution, which does not allow for the abolition of universities.

Athena results in the immediate closure of four universities (10 percent of the remaining 40). These are the University of Central Greece, the University of Western Greece, the International Hellenic University and the University of Western Macedonia.

The occupation in Patras, the country's third-largest city, is part of a series of actions students planned to carry out this week.

German civilian employees protest at Ramstein Air Base for higher wages

Civilian employees at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany staged a protest Wednesday to demand a pay increase. The protest was organised by the Verdi trade union representing German civilians employed at US bases. Protests were also held at Pirmasens and other bases in the Kaiserslautern region.

According to press reports, the workers have not received a pay increase in three years. Some 22,000 workers will be affected by the outcome of talks being held between the union and military personnel this week, with full negotiations scheduled for April 23.

The fact that workers at the bases have not received an increase is the responsibility of Verdi. A report on stripes.com cited Regina Divivier, a union representative and member of the Ramstein Works Council, saying that workers accepted one-time 300-euro bonuses for the past two years and that this year Verdi planned to ask for a 5.5 percent raise, making it clear that this was "negotiable."

Romanian chemical workers strike bankrupt company

On March 28, workers at Romania's bankrupt chemical producer Oltchim took strike action and protested outside the plant against job losses and to demand unpaid wages. More than 1,000 workers were involved after learning they were being laid off and were not being paid, pending a company restructuring plan.

Oltchim is the country's largest chemical firm, and around half of the workers involved were from Oltchim the petrochemical division in Pitesti.

The previous day, some 500 staff from Oltchim and its petrochemical division blocked traffic in Ramnicu Valcea and Pitesti respectively. According to *romainian-insider.com* they requested that government representatives "come down and present them the plan for Oltchim."

In March, 512 workers struck after being laid off at the company's plant in Mechel Targoviste, which also went bankrupt. They received just 20-days notice and three basic wage payments in the way of compensatory payments.

A trade union official quoted on *romainian-insider.com* said, "There are people here who have been struggling to live in the last three months, have bank loans, children to feed, it is a social catastrophe."

Oltchim went bankrupt after going through a failed privatization attempt last year, with its losses rising to around 90.5 euros million in 2012. By the end of last year its total debt stood at 620 million euros.

Ambulance workers in Yorkshire, England hold 24-hour action

Around 450 ambulance workers in Yorkshire, England took part in a 24-hour strike Tuesday, in a dispute over staffing changes influenced by plans to introduce emergency care assistants to work with Yorkshire Ambulance Service's more highly-trained paramedics. The plans will adversely affect patient care.

The plan is expected to save Yorkshire Ambulance Service £46 million over five years.

Ambulance workers launched an overtime ban last week after voting in favour of industrial action last month. Of the 212 members of the union Unite who voted in the ballot, 61 percent were in favour of strikes and 83 percent were in favour of other forms of industrial action.

Union leaders offered to hold Easter talks with management in a bid to avert the strike.

UK postal workers set to strike

Thousands of UK postal staff working in over 373 Crown—or main—offices across the country went on a 24-hour strike March 30 (Easter Saturday) in a dispute over jobs, pay and shop closures.

In February, 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.

The staff handle 20 percent of all Post Office business and are opposing plans to close and franchise Crown offices.

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

Staff at West Sussex County Council in England strike over pay

Around 80 staff at West Sussex County Council's public contact centre, at the Bognor Regis site in England, went on strike this week in a dispute over a rejected pay offer.

The corporate employer Serco offered a mere £65 payment this year. Staff have not had a pay rise for the past three years.

Athens court rules against strike at Civil Aviation Service

This week an Athens court ruled that a scheduled 24-hour a strike of Civil Aviation Service (CAS) employees was "illegal and abusive."

Flights across the country were to be grounded for 24 hours on Thursday due to a strike by civil aviation workers protesting against government plans to privatize 38 airports this year.

Scheduled military training flights, flights of government officials and flights related to emergencies were ensured not to be affected by the strike.

This was the third such measure in as many months. On January 25, a strike by Athens subway workers was broken when the workers were drafted into civilian military service and attacked by the police. The following month, the illegalisation of the ferry workers' strike was achieved through the use of martial law. The unions have acted throughout to wind down and sabotage opposition from workers.

Egyptian rail workers may strike

An impending strike of railway workers was suspended until Saturday after union negotiations with the Cabinet and the Ministry of Manpower.

Rail workers are demanding wage increases, meal allowances, more incentives for train conductors, payment of annual profits, and recognition of the Independent Railway Workers' Syndicate, said Tarek Al-Beheiry, vice president of the Independent Transport Workers' Union.

The state-owned *Al-Ahram* reported that 12 workers attended the meeting as representatives of train conductors, ticket collectors and supervisors along with Workers' Union President and Shura Council member Al-Gebaly Al-Maraghy and General Syndicate Chairman Abdel Fattah Fekry.

The General Railway Workers' Syndicate said the workers demanded an eight-day vacation per month or a cash allowance for the extra days conductors work. *Daily News Egypt* reported that workers threatened a full strike across the country if these demands are not met.

Egyptian Railway Authority head Hussein Zakaria told *Al-Ahram* that there were plans to recruit conductors from the army to act as strikebreakers.

Ghana gold miners begin strike

More than 3,000 gold miners at the Tarkwa and Damang mines in Ghana came out on an indefinite strike Wednesday. The mines are owned by Goldfields Ghana and account for over 40 percent of Goldfields' output.

The miners are demanding an end to racial discrimination and better conditions. The Ghanaian miners are housed in a dilapidated village, whereas expatriate workers at the mine have superior housing, access to restaurants, a gym and social club.

They are also demanding the restoration of a bonus calculation, which had given miners a bonus based on a 1.25 percent share of profits at the end of the year. Goldfields had changed the calculation to the detriment of the miners.

Nigerian health workers on indefinite action

Health workers belonging to the Medical and Health Workers Union and the Nigerian Nurses and Midwives in the North Western state of Zamfara were due to begin an indefinite strike Wednesday of this week. The strike follows the failure of the Zamfara state government to heed an ultimatum from the workers for them to implement a previously agreed salary structure.

South African coal miners sacked for wildcat strike

Two hundred and fifty miners working for Shanduka Coal, at their Graspan colliery in Mpumalanga, have been sacked after taking part in an unofficial two-day strike last week. They were demanding the payment of performance bonuses.

After calling the strike, the miners picketed the site but were then attacked by police using rubber bullets to disperse the miners.

The miners are members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The NUM is currently in discussion with Shanduka Coal regarding the miners' reinstatement.



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