

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

12 April 2013

## Thousands of UK civil servants walk out

Thousands of HM Revenue and Customs staff in Britain walked off the job this week, as part of a series of strikes being staged by civil servants over job cuts, pensions and terms and conditions.

Workers from the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) took part in a half-day walkout Monday, coinciding with the start of the new tax year. At least 55,000 workers at call centres and face-to-face enquiry centres at HMRC were on strike until lunchtime on Monday, in a show of solidarity.

Staff at the DWP Pension Centre and the Jobcentre in Dundee also struck.

The strike followed that of workers at government departments, courts and museums who walked out the previous Friday.

A 24-hour strike planned for Monday at the home office was called off by the PCS after a legal challenge from the government.

The union said it would sanction a week-long series of walkouts across various parts of the department in a fortnight's time.

## Locked-out Danish teachers form 35-kilometre human chain in protest

On Tuesday, teachers in Denmark, who have been locked-out for a week, formed a 35-kilometre human chain in protest. Local authorities shut the schools when negotiations with teachers over working hours broke down. The lockout affected some 50,000 teachers who teach more than 600,000 students who had returned to school following the Easter holiday.

The Danish Teachers' Union says 6,000 teachers formed the chain between the capital Copenhagen and the city of Roskilde.

On April 2, teachers protested throughout the country after being locked out of their schools. The lockout occurred after the teachers union and the local government association failed to agree a new collective bargaining agreement by April 1.

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.

## German workers strike Amazon

On Wednesday, hundreds of workers employed at online retail giant Amazon's central depot in Bad Hersfeld, Germany walked out in protest of working conditions and pay. The action is the first such strike at an Amazon facility.

A vote by workers organised in the service industry union Verdi showed 97 percent of those who took part were in favour of industrial action.

The workers at its Leipzig logistics warehouse also voted to strike for higher wages and better working conditions. The workforce is demanding the minimum wage of €10.66 an hour.

Amazon employs around 9,000 workers across Germany.

A documentary film shown by broadcaster ARD in February shows that temporary workers were paid low wages, and faced broken promises of getting a proper job. The film also shows foreign workers living in horrible conditions and being bullied by security personnel, some of whom wore clothing associated with neo-Nazi groups. The firm has since been fired by Amazon.

## Staff walkout closes Paris' Louvre museum

On Wednesday, over 100 staff staged a walkout at the Louvre—the world's most visited museum—in Paris, France in protest of raids by organised gangs which they said were growing in number and becoming more aggressive, targeting both visitors and staff in the galleries. The Louvre was forced to close as a result.

Some staff have complained of being spat at, insulted, threatened or kicked, and saying thieves had become more violent.

According to the *Guardian*: "The museum said in a statement that pickpocketing was a growing problem despite measures taken last year, including tighter cooperation with the police and temporary bans on people already identified as pickpockets from re-entering the museum. Late last year, the Louvre filed an official complaint to the state prosecutor over visitors falling victim to the thieves."

The Louvre, which had 10 million visitors last year, would normally draw 30,000 a day at this time of year to see a vast body of historical objects and art works, among which are 50,000 pieces of Egyptian antiquities and 7,500 paintings, which includes Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa.

## Cypriot bank workers' strike

The bank workers trade union ETYK called a token two-hour work stoppage on April 4, saying the pensions of its members at the island's two largest banks, hit by huge losses under an international bailout deal,

were not protected.

The union said the pension funds of workers in Popular Bank and Bank of Cyprus were at risk, as were those of other institutions deposited in the banks.

Around 11,000 bank workers are organised in the union.

Under a €10 billion loan accord by the troika of the European Union, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Cyprus was forced to split Popular Bank's assets into a "good" and "bad" bank.

The authorities have also forced heavy losses on uninsured depositors in the Bank of Cyprus, the island's largest lender, which is to take over accounts at Popular Bank.

Cypriot banks were closed for two weeks while the bailout deal was being negotiated, reopening last week.

Despite the enormous attacks being made on the living standards of the Cypriot population by the troika, the trade unions have barely lifted a finger in protest, authorising just the two hour bank workers action and a small protest outside parliament.

### **Riot police continue attacks on gold mine protesters in northern Greece**

On Wednesday, riot police broke down doors of houses in Lerissos, a village in northern Greece, to arrest people allegedly protesting plans to develop a gold mine.

Following the 3 a.m. raids, the police arrested two men, alleging they were involved in a nearby case of arson. The police action sparked off a protest by angered residents who proceeded to attack the local police station.

The Canadian-based Eldorado Gold Corp plans to establish the mine in teeth of the protest from those who live in the area. Protesters say the project will harm the economy in Greece's northern Halkidiki peninsula which relies heavily on farming and tourism.

Riot police have repeatedly attacked the protests of Lerissos residents with teargas. On one occasion, teargas was fired in front of an occupied school, causing pupils inside to suffer the effects. According to a former mayor for the area, a student also suffered a head injury.

### **Irish teachers set to protest over Croke Park II austerity programme**

Teachers and lecturers registered their opposition to the "Croke Park II" pay deal last week. Croke Park II, the new three-year plan agreed by Ireland's Fine Gael-Labour Party coalition and the trade unions will see another €1 billion (US\$1.3 billion) eliminated from public spending. The agreement continues the no-strike Croke Park deal first accepted in 2010 and will run until 2016.

At the annual Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) conference in Galway, 450 delegates overwhelmingly decided to withdraw from the current public service agreement, if the government proceeds to implement proposals that will affect their pay and conditions from next year.

In a ballot last month, 86 percent of TUI members rejected the proposed public pay agreement.

This week Public Spending Minister Brendan Howlin warned public sector workers they face a flat-rate pay cut of 7 percent if they reject the Croke Park II deal.

### **Strike by Egyptian train drivers and guards faces army strikebreaking**

Striking train drivers and guards in Egypt confront army strikebreaking after their national strike paralyzed train services for three days.

Around 100 drivers were reportedly transferred to the transport directorate in the army in an attempt to crush the strike. Strikebreakers were also offered bonuses of 300 Egyptian pounds and strikers were threatened with arrest.

On Tuesday, train services were said to be resuming across the country, despite the strikers' main demands not having been met. The workers' demands include a rise in the bonus per kilometre travelled.

### **Iraqi oil workers protest over delayed payments, working conditions**

Workers employed by the South Oil Company in Iraq protested this week against years of delayed bonus payments and other benefits, as well as over working conditions.

"In spite of the impending prosecution of a prominent union leader, oil workers in Basra have renewed their protests demanding better treatment. Employees of South Oil Company (SOC) have created a tent city outside of the state-run company's headquarters in Basra, decrying unpaid bonuses, demands to transfer temporary workers to permanent status, and other complaints," according to the *Iraq Oil Report*.

Meanwhile, a separate report in the same publication reported that "Iraq is expected to increase its oil production capacity by 500 percent over the next 10 years."

### **Kenyan council workers strike**

More than a 1,000 municipal workers in Kisumu have gone on strike over salary arrears. Following a collective bargaining agreement awarded by an industrial court, the workers gained a salary increase, which the council had paid in March. However the council then announced it would revert to the previous lower salary.

At the end of last week, around 350 municipal workers employed by Nyeri council went on strike over arrears of pay. They too had been awarded a pay increase of between six and 30 percent but Nyeri municipality is yet to pay the increase. The arrears cover the period from September last year.

### **Swaziland teachers protest proposed pay award to police**

The Swaziland National Association of Teachers has protested the proposed 30 percent pay award to police. They accuse the government of taking money from education to pay the police increase. Teachers took strike action last year in pursuit of a 4.5 percent pay increase, however their strike was stopped following court action.

### **Nigerian health workers demand state government honours**

## **agreement**

The Medical and Health Workers Union of Nigeria (MHWUN) in the south eastern Nigerian state of Cross River are demanding the state government pay a 30 percent increase signed in 2011 under the Consolidated Health Workers Salary Structure (CONHESS). This was previously signed into law by the federal government.

MHWUN is threatening strike action if the state government does not pay the increase. According to the union other workers in the state take home N19, 500 (US\$124), health workers are paid only N14, 650 (US\$93).

## **Tunisian call centre workers strike**

Workers employed by the French call centre firm Teleperformance struck last week over poor working conditions at the firm's sites in Tunis. They accused the company of slashing bonuses, bullying and enforcing transfers. The three-day strike paralysed operations at four call centres.

They carried placards proclaiming "2003 salary = 2013 salary". Sami Houli, a trade union representative said the company refused to negotiate and accused its representative of hitting him in the face.

Teleperformance operates in 49 countries employing 135,000, of which 6,000 are in Tunisia. It handles calls for French and Canadian companies.

## **South African teachers embark on go-slow action**

Teachers belonging to the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) have begun go-slow action. They are demanding the removal of Basic Education minister Angie Motshekga and her director-general Bobby Soobrayan.

The union accuses them of plunging the education system into chaos and failing to honour a 2011 agreement in which exam markers would have received a nearly seven percent pay increase.



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