

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

3 May 2013

Riot police attack May Day protesters in Istanbul

On Wednesday, Turkish riot police mounted a major operation to prevent a planned May Day demonstration from being held in Istanbul's main Taksim Square, the historic location for rallies and protests in the city.

On the orders of the government, bridges were raised and boat traffic banned, whilst riot police used teargas and water cannon against tens of thousands of anti-government protesters who gathered in the city's central Sisli district, in opposition to austerity and to demand better working conditions. As part of the operation, subway, bus and ferry services across the Bosphorus were partially suspended to prevent people from arriving in the city.

During the day, Istanbul was placed under armed lockdown as 22,000 police were deployed all over the city, with a heavy presence in the district of Besiktas, the location of the prime minister's residence. Barricades were erected all around the Taksim area and the prime minister's residence.

According to reports many were injured by the police attacks, including an AFP news agency photographer, and 72 arrests were made. AFP reporters said they saw at least 10 people with injuries with most of those suffering from heart problems due to tear gas inhalation. A Reuter's news team saw six injured protesters. Turkish media reported that one of the injured, a high school girl, was in critical condition.

The government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, claimed that the demonstration in Taksim was banned in order to protect the safety of protesters, due to the square currently being refitted and pedestrianised.

One demonstrator cited in the *Financial Times* said, "They are trying to take Taksim from us. We want to get to Taksim, but it is not possible, as you can see, as you can't breathe."

The demonstration was banned despite May 1 being declared a national holiday in 2009, with annual rallies allowed to take place in each subsequent year. Taksim Square has a symbolic importance for protesters as 34 people were killed there when shots were fired into the crowd by unidentified right wing forces from a nearby building during Labour Day in 1977.

Swedish transport workers strike ends as new contact agreed

On April 26, Swedish port workers and road haulers ended a short strike after the Swedish Transport Workers' Union and Swedish Road Transport Employers Association reached an agreement over a new contract.

Following a previous breakdown in talks, the workers walked off the job at noon, only for the strike to be ended 45 minutes later after the parties reached agreement on a new three-year deal. Other workers who struck

included refuse collectors and security guards but these were not included in the new deal.

The International Transport Federation (ITF) sought to portray the agreement as a "major breakthrough for transport workers in Sweden." The reality is that transport firms will still be able to employ agency workers with few employment rights, who will continue to be used as a means to undermine the conditions of all employees. Stephen Cotton, the ITF acting general secretary said, "It's been agreed that when a transport company wants to take on a temporary employer for a job, although the union won't be able to veto the use of agency workers, they will be automatically given the opportunity to negotiate and whilst those negotiations take place, the agencies can't be used."

German airline Lufthansa and Ver.di trade union reach agreement to end dispute

German airline Lufthansa AG signed a deal with the trade unions including Ver.di on May 1, averting any further strike action. The deal covers some 33,000 mechanical and back-office employees employed at Lufthansa Systems, Lufthansa Technik and Lufthansa Cargo units, who are to receive a pay increase of 3 to 4.7 percent, according to Ver.di.

Workers at Lufthansa have struck the company in recent weeks. On April 22, a one-day strike grounded 1,700 Lufthansa flights, affecting around 150,000 passengers.

The pay increase agreed by Ver.di is significantly lower than the 5.2 percent rise for all staff over a 12-month period, it had originally called for.

Whilst making the agreement with Ver.di, Lufthansa is still proceeding with a restructuring plan, known as SCORE, to cut costs. This includes imposing 3,500 job losses and transferring all continental traffic outside its main hubs to its Germanwings low-cost company. Whilst the 26-month agreement excludes compulsory redundancies, workers could be asked to take voluntary redundancy.

Following the agreement Lufthansa predicted a higher operating profit and sales for this year. The company's shares rose by 5.8 percent, their highest level in six months.

The airline rose as much as 88 cents to 15.95 euros in Frankfurt, the most since the end of October. Lufthansa has advanced 13 percent this year, valuing the company at about 7.2 billion euros.

As part of its cost cutting, Lufthansa is to spend 200 million less on fuel than previously predicted. Ruxandra Haradau-Doeser, an analyst at Kepler Capital Markets in Frankfurt said, "The reduced guidance for fuel costs is a positive, as is the agreement with Ver.di union yesterday".

UK postal workers set for fourth strike

On Tuesday, postal workers announced plans for their fourth strike in as many weeks after the Post Office confirmed plans to transfer 70 of its big

high street and city centre branches to retailers.

The workers voted nine-to-one in favour of a full-day strike on May 7, the day after the May bank holiday. Postal employees have already held three strikes against the franchising plan since Easter Saturday, including a half-day strike Monday.

An estimated 800 Post Office jobs are expected to be affected and staff are likely to receive inferior pay, pension and working conditions if they are transferred to retailers' control.

The Post Office said it had offered crown network staff an "extremely fair" £3,400 staged payment in recompense, which is worth around one sixth of an average Post Office employee's annual wage.

UK rail workers ballot for industrial action

The Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) announced Wednesday that it will begin balloting all members on the UK's Northern Rail network next week for industrial action in a dispute over casualisation.

The proposals will detrimentally affect job security, pay and working conditions

Also in contention is the issue of agency staff. According to the RMT website, "Despite repeated protests from RMT, Northern Rail management continue to use agency and sub-contracted labour for core railway work. Agency staff and other companies are carrying out roles within Northern Rail which should be carried out by RMT members employed directly within the company."

The ballot will open next week and will close on May 20. The RMT site statement concluded with the message that it "remains available for meaningful talks."

Irish bus workers to vote on strike

Transport workers employed by Bus Eireann are to ballot on industrial action following the company's cost-cutting announcement. SIPTU union official Willie Noonan said management was forcing workers to ballot "at the earliest opportunity."

Polish Solidarity threatens strike in September

The head of the Solidarity trade union, Piotr Duda, threatened a general strike Wednesday, prior to a meeting with Prime Minister Donald Tusk, over proposed amendments to limit employment rights and reduce overtime payments.

The warning follows a strike in Silesia last month in protest against proposed changes to the labour code which would extend the use of "junk" employment contracts. Duda made it clear that any action was not proposed before September.

Egyptian state council staff occupy courts

Striking employees occupied courts at the State Council in Cairo demanding better working conditions and higher wages. *Al Ahram* reported that the court's security personnel were at the scene, but had not intervened.

A report released by the Egyptian Centre for Social and Economic Rights (ECSR) revealed that in 2012 alone, Egypt witnessed 1,969 protests by workers—in the government, public and private sectors—marking a considerable increase compared to 2010, when only 530 protests were recorded. Thirty-six percent of these protests were staged to demand better pay.

Strikes and protests have more than doubled since the election of President Mohamed Morsi.

Rolling public sector strikes in Ghana

For three weeks public sector workers in Ghana have undertaken a series of strikes in opposition to the introduction of a Single Spine Salary Structure (SSSS) brought in by the Fair Wages and Salaries Commission (FWSC).

Under the SSSS all public sector workers, regardless of their profession, are part of a common salary structure. Primary and secondary school teachers were the first to take strike action, as its introduction meant the cancellation of automatic salary increments paid at the beginning of each academic year. The teachers' unions began their strike on March 18, but returned to work in response to a government's promise to address their grievance.

University teachers then struck, demanding payment of salary arrears dating back to last year. University students demonstrated in support. Lecturers have now returned to work.

Doctors and pharmacists began strike action on April 22, demanding higher wages. Nurses may join them.

Tunisian teachers second day of strike action

Tunisian teachers came out on a second one-day strike last week, following one the previous week. According to the Secondary School Teachers' Union, 22 out of the 24 Tunisian provinces reported an 80 percent or greater support for the strike.

South Sudan trade union suspended following a decree

On April 24 the governor of South Sudan's Warrap state suspended the trade union representing over 6,500 civil servants in the state. She did so after the union protested the governor's action in cutting a day's pay from all civil servants. The pay cut was in order to use the money saved to stage a sports tournament in May.

Strike by children at South African school for the blind

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has supported

the strike by school children at the Christina School for the blind in the North West. The children are protesting conditions at the school, including health and safety provision. They accuse the headmaster of racism.

Four boys aged between eight and nine died in a dormitory fire at the school in November 2010. COSATU has called on the South African Human Rights Commission to investigate the situation.



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South African Netcare workers strike continues

Health care workers employed by Netcare, South Africa's largest private hospital group, are continuing their strike which began on Tuesday 16 April. The workers, members of the National Education Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU), are seeking an 11 percent pay increase, opposing the employer's offer of 7.2 percent.

The union met with Netcare representatives on April 22, under the auspices of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). At the meeting Netcare upped its offer to 7.25 percent.

This was rejected, after which Netcare attempted to get a court interdict to block NEHAWU members at four hospitals from joining the strike. The court rejected the request.

On April 29, over 1,500 Netcare workers marched to the Netcare head office to hand in a petition to the group's CEO. Netcare management and the union resumed pay talks on April 30.

South African bus strike continues

The strike by bus drivers at the Golden Arrow Company in Western Cape is entering its second week. The drivers, members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union, are seeking an 18 percent pay increase. Management has offered between 7.5 and eight percent.

Nigerian academics strike

Workers at the Institute of Agricultural Research and Training in Ibadan, Oyo state, are on strike following the arraignment in court of 15 colleagues. The court arraignment was at the insistence of the institute's head, Professor Ogunbodede. They are demanding intervention by the federal government to remove Ogunbodede. Previously institute staff accused Ogunbodede of fraud.

The University of Abuja chapter of the Academic Staff Union of Universities began a two-week strike Monday. They are demanding the implementation of the report drawn up by the presidential visitation panel which visited the university last year. The panel intervened following a crisis of governance at the university.

Lecturers at tertiary institutions in Osun state are continuing their two-month strike. They are opposing an elongation of their retirement age from 60 to 65, implementation of a new tax regime and demanding an easing of staff shortages.

The Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics ASUP began indefinite strike action Sunday, following a seven-day warning strike. They are opposing the failure of most state governments to implement a previously agreed salary package and calling for a retirement age of 65.