

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

26 July 2013

Europe

Italian doctors and health care workers strike

Thousands of Italian doctors and health care workers staged a four-hour nationwide strike Monday to protest cuts to the country's health service and poor working contracts.

The action resulted in the cancellation of an estimated half-million appointments and over 30,000 non-emergency medical procedures across the country.

Around 400 medics protested at the Ministry of Economy in Rome.

There has been a €1 billion cut in the 2013 health budget, combined with a freeze on doctor wages since 2009. Italy was hit particularly hard by the international financial crisis that began in 2008, and is among a series of southern European countries whose economies are on the brink of collapse.

According to a recent report by the National Institute for Statistics, 15 million Italians have been categorized as suffering from "economic distress," with almost nine million of these categorized as facing "serious economic distress."

Greek teachers protest mass firings by government

On Monday, 2,000 Greek teachers were suspended from their jobs with immediate effect, following the abolition of a number of courses at technical and vocational schools last week. The measures ended 388 nursing courses and 335 early childhood care courses.

Secondary school teachers from vocational and technical upper high schools participated in nationwide rallies the same day to protest the suspensions. The protests included a demonstration in Athens main Syntagma Square.

Under the dictatorial measures, the teachers will be paid 75 percent of their salary for up to eight months. They will then be fired if they haven't been transferred to another state job.

The secondary teachers union Olme has refused to call out all its members in support of the sacked teachers. Instead it has filed a legal complaint against the education minister and other officials. It accuses them of implementing the measures prior to parliament passing the legislation. It complains that the government published the names and other personal data of some 2,500 affected teachers.

In May, the union defied a 95 percent vote for strike action from delegates at regional conferences of OLME. This paved the way for the government to step its offensive against teachers.

Health workers in Greece oppose mass sackings

State health service workers in Greece struck Wednesday to protest government plans to involuntarily transfer around 2,500 staff into a "labour mobility" austerity scheme. State hospitals and surgeries operated with emergency staff during the 24-hour strike. Health workers also struck to oppose the measures on July 16.

One employee at the University Hospital of Ioannia told Press TV, "The national health system's budget has already been cut [by] 40 percent in the last three years. We are in desperate need of more doctors, nursing staff, and medical technicians."

The action was called by the PanHellenic Federation of Employees in Public Hospitals (POEDIN). POEDIN stated "The mergers, the closure of hospitals, the closure of 770 units, which are parts of the Greek National Health System, the new organizations, the possible repeal of entire professional fields, will be the tools for the implementation of this analgesic policy in the field of health."

Under the scheme, agreed last week with the European Commission, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank, workers are removed from employment and paid at a lower rate for months. The conditions stipulate that if workers don't accept whatever job is subsequently offered to them, they can be sacked. It is likely that workers will not be offered alternative employment in any case.

Health workers, teachers and municipal workers are among the 12,500 public-sector staff, to be subjected to transfers and inevitable firings. The labour mobility scheme will cut 15,000 jobs by the end of 2014.

In another move to cut health spending the Greek government intends to transform at least five public hospitals in Athens into health centres, focussing on chronic illnesses.

Strike at Capita UK

Workers at Capita in the UK will go on a 24-hour strike today after the company offered them a 1.1 percent pay rise, despite profits and dividends to shareholders going up 10 percent.

The dispute centres on the company's performance-related pay policies and its decision to impose a deal less than inflation pay increase for 90 percent of staff. This follows several years of real-term pay cuts and increased pension contributions.

Staff who were balloted are spread across the UK based at Belfast, Bournemouth, Birmingham, Bristol, Craigforth, Glasgow, Manchester and Reading.

Listed on the London Stock Exchange as a constituent of the FTSE 100 Index, Capita is the largest business process outsourcing company in the UK, with an overall market share of 27 percent in 2009. It has clients in

central government, local government, and the private sector.

Action at the company could affect Deutsche Bank (Abbey Life), Prudential, Royal London, Met Life, Phoenix, and Friends Life.

UK university staff to vote on action

Higher education staff in the UK are to be balloted for a possible strike, following a refusal from the employers to increase their one percent pay offer.

Many universities are believed to have cash surpluses available. In Wales, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales reported a total surplus of £30 million.

University staff have had pay rises below the cost of living over the last five years. Some of the lowest-paid employees, many of whom receive just above the minimum wage, have lost up to £1,173 a year. Over 4,000 higher education staff are paid less than £7.45 per hour (£8.55 in London).

According to recent freedom of information requests sent to all UK universities by the UNISON public sector trade union, the median pay of the highest-paid members of staff in the sector (including pension contributions and other pay-related elements) is £242,000. The highest-paid employee receives over £500,000 a year.

Irish government print facility workers strike

Workers at the state government printing facility in Ireland went on strike last week as a result of a failure of management “to fully honour agreements entered into in good faith.”

The workers were told on July 16 that their core pay was being reduced without any prior discussion. The central issue has been a “unilateral decision by management to interpret our existing agreement in a new manner,” according to a statement from the workers.

SIPTU Organiser Jane Boushell said in a statement, “We are engaged in discussions with management to try and resolve the issues at the centre of this dispute.”

A source told *TheJournal.ie* that as the strike is technically “unofficial,” some of the workers believed that SIPTU was more concerned with having their name taken off any leaflets or releases related to the action than with any concern for the workers themselves.

Polish railway workers vote for strike

Cargo transport workers at Polish State Railways (PKP) have voted in favour of a strike if their demands are not met over the state-controlled company’s impending privatisation.

PKP aims to sell up to a 50 percent stake in PKP Cargo, which is the second largest cargo carrier in the European Union. Workers are demanding assurances that wages will be increased by an average of €106, that pending bonuses will be honoured and that employees will have job security for a minimum of six years.

Almost 65 percent of those employed by PKP Cargo took part in the ballot, and from this proportion, over 96 percent backed a strike in relation to the three principal demands.

Middle East

Turkish steel workers strike

Over 7,000 workers in two major steel companies went on strike last week following a breakdown in six-month-long negotiations on a collective bargaining agreement.

One of the companies, Isdemir, is the largest integrated iron and steel plant in Turkey. With 5,000 out of 5,300 workers participating in the strike, production at Isdemir completely stopped. Workers’ families showed their support by gathering in front of the factory.

Also, in the same city, a second strike took place, involving 1,800 workers at the subsidiary of Russian-based leading steel producer and metals company MMK (Magnitogorsk Iron and Steel Works).

Strike at Jordanian customs

Over the weekend, workers at the Jordan Customs Department went on strike asking for Ramadan bonuses of JD 125 (about 2,500USD). The country’s finance minister has stopped paying, raises, overtime payments, bigger housing loans and exempting their cars from customs fees, according to a Jordanian security source.

The Foodstuff Traders Association (FTA) warned on Sunday that the country’s stocks of various food staples would rapidly decline if the strike continued. The FTA said in a statement that 4,000 containers loaded with various food items, including refrigerated meat, had been stuck at customs centres at the country’s borders for over a week, awaiting clearance.

The Saudi Embassy in Jordan intervened by asking the authorities to facilitate the movement of Saudis stranded at border crossings. A Jordanian security source said that if the crisis continues the department would ask retired customs officials to help out temporarily.

Iranian steel workers protest

The *Fars News* agency reported last week on the continuation of protests by workers from the Zagros Steel Factory in front of the Iranian Parliament in Tehran, over their dismissal and months of unpaid wages.

Over 200 workers were reportedly laid off from the Zagros Steel Factory in Kurdistan last week. The Zagros Steel Company has closed down after at least two years of showing losses.

One of the laid-off workers told the semi-official *Iranian Labor News Agency* that most were from the Zagros Steel Factory and had spent the night in a yard near the Tehran cemetery and on the grounds of the mausoleum of the late Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini because they didn’t have enough money to pay for hotel rooms.

The *LA Times* noted that a factor that some see as contributing to the crisis is the government’s decision to phase out state subsidies on fuel, food and energy, which might mean the price of fuel and electricity, water and household gas could rise by up to 38 percent in the coming months.

Africa

Namibian fish farm workers’ strike

Around 800 fish process workers at the Hangana Seafood factory went on strike last week over worsening conditions, mismanagement and unfair dismissals. The members of the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union were also protesting threats to cut their wages by 50 percent if the company had no work.

Natangwe Nenghwanya explained, “The no work no pay system was introduced to abuse and exploit workers like us. We cannot allow this to happen again.”

Liberian health workers strike

Health workers and nurses began a strike July 22. Their action has been supported by the Association of Midwifery. They continued their strike in spite of government threats, having various grievances against the government.

Kenyan nurses set to strike

A 21-day notice of strike action is due to come into effect today. The notice was issued by the Kenya National Union of Nurses (KNUN), in pursuit of demands for the government to employ an additional 40,000 maternity nurses. They are also seeking improved conditions of service and that the government complete negotiations on a Comprehensive Bargaining Agreement with the KNUN.

Support for striking Nigerian University lecturers

The strike by Nigerian university lecturers in the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) which began at the beginning of the month continues. They are demanding the federal government implement the agreement it signed in 2009.

Student activists at Awolowo University voiced support and called on the National Association of Nigerian Students to support the strike.

The president of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) also called for support and for “the federal government to have meaningful dialogue with the ASUU with a view to implementing the agreement.”

A Joint Action Committee, comprising the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities SSANU, the National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT) and the Non-Academic Staff Union of Educational and Associated Institutions (NASU), has announced it may join its ASSU colleagues and come out on strike. They too are calling on the federal government to implement agreements made with them in 2009.

South African dairy workers strike

Around 450 workers at the dairy producer Parmalat began an official strike July 23. They are seeking a nine percent pay increase. The company has offered seven percent. The workers are members of the Food and Allied Workers Union.

South African gold miners end strike

The underground sit-in strike by around 100 South African miners at the Cons Murch antimony and gold mine in Limpopo has ended. The unofficial strike began over demands for the mining company to pay dividends they say they were owed. The miners are members of the National Union of Mineworkers.

South African airline workers strike

Workers at South African Airlines, members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union, went on strike last week in pursuit of a pay increase.

The union was reluctant to strike and had urged management to begin meaningful negotiations, but declared the strike when negotiations failed.



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