

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

13 September 2013

## Europe

### French workers demonstrate against attack on pensions

Workers in France protested Tuesday against a reform of the country's indebted pension system that will penalise workers and youth. The Confédération générale du travail (General Confederation of Labour) CGT union called for protests in 180 locations across the country.

Other unions declared they were not supportive of the strike. Laurent Berger, head of the Confédération française démocratique du travail (French Democratic Confederation of Labour) CFDT union, told Tele news television: "Why strike tomorrow? Any amendments we are seeking, we can obtain them in parliament."

The draft pension law, to be presented to the cabinet on September 18 and sent to parliament shortly thereafter, aims to extend the pay-in period for pension contributions to 43 years by 2035 from the current 41.5 years.

### Thousands of workers march through Warsaw

Thousands of workers marched through Warsaw, the Polish capital, on Wednesday to protest against government labour policy and pension system reform and to demand higher pay.

The march was the first of four days of protests planned in the city by Solidarity, the OPZZ union—the country's largest—and several smaller organisations.

City officials said 10,000 marched from various ministries. Organisers said around 18,000 trade union members from across the country took part, and they expect a total of 100,000 marchers on the final day, Saturday.

Workers are seeking job security and contracts that guarantee health care and retirement benefits at a time when unemployment is at 13 percent and many companies offer short-term contracts without social security.

The 40-hour workweek is among the longest in Europe, while average month wages of about 3,700 zlotys (US\$1,150) before tax are among Europe's lowest.

Workers are also demanding the reversal of a recent raise in the retirement age to 67 years from the previous 60 years for women and 65 years for men.

### University of Athens workers protest job losses

On Monday, the senate of the University of Athens, Greece's largest university, voted to strike until next Monday against the government's plans to remove hundreds of its administrative staff.

Registration of incoming students, originally set to begin on September 11, has been postponed.

Theodoros Pelegrinis, the head of the university, said the government's "mobility scheme" would leave the university unable to function. In an interview on Skai TV, Pelegrinis said the university was facing its worst crisis in a decade.

Unions say that of the 6,239 administrative staff at third-level institutions across the country, the government is seeking to place around 25 percent, in its "mobility scheme", which will end in dismissal if another job for them cannot be found in the public sector.

In July, around 2,500 teachers were put into a "mobility scheme".

The US and UK have 8.7 and 7.3 teaching staff per 100 students, while Athens has 3.1 per 100.

On Monday, university administrators in a number of colleges in the north of the country voted to start 48-hour strikes, starting Tuesday. The strike affects the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki and the Thessaloniki Technical College (TEI).

At the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, there are 750 administrators for 2,200 faculty members and 70,000 students.

### Greek high school teachers to strike

High school teachers are to launch rolling five-day strikes from September 16. The Federation of Secondary School Teachers (OLME) announced the decision late on Monday after 72 of its 85 local chapters approved industrial action.

OLME says that there will be 16,000 fewer teachers at Greek schools this year compared to last year as a result of the changes.

Last Friday, *Prensa Latina* reported: "Meanwhile, yesterday the Ministry of Education issued a circular to all schools requesting to calculate the excess number of employees according to a series of indicators and limits, and develop detailed lists of these officials."

### Three-day action planned at Greek state hospitals

Staff at Greek state hospital services are to hold a three-day strike to protest cutbacks in the health sector imposed as part of Greece's commitments to its international creditors.

The strike is to take place from September 17 to 19 and comes under the aegis of the hospital doctors' union, OENGE. The walkout is timed to

start a day before a 24-hour strike by the civil servants' union, ADEDY, over job losses.

The government intends to suspend 25,000 public servants this year and fire another 15,000 by the end of 2014.

### **Aeroflot faces dispute with pilots over working conditions**

Pilots and flight attendants on Aeroflot are involved in a dispute with the Russian national carrier over pay, night flights, harmful working conditions, and a lack of qualified personnel. Staff have also said the overall working conditions at the airline pose a threat to the safety of passengers.

Citing the Labour Code, the SCPA said that Aeroflot owed its pilots and flight attendants more than 1 billion rubles (US\$30 million) for flying at night and in harmful working conditions.

After a series of court hearings and appeals, the Moscow City Court ruled in July that Aeroflot was obliged to pay out the debt over a period of 17 months, from March 2011 to August 2012. Staff are yet to receive any payments.

In July, Aeroflot carried more than 2 million passengers, up 20 percent from the same period last year. The airline's revenue for the first half of the year exceeded 92 billion rubles, 19 percent higher than in the first half of 2012

### **England's ambulance service could face strike**

Ambulance workers in the UK could strike as National Health Service (NHS) employers and all ambulance trusts in England have imposed cuts in sick pay of up to 25 percent.

On Wednesday, the GMB trade union announced that it and "other ambulance service unions at the Trades Union Congress (TUC) congress announced they are in dispute with the ambulance service in England and said their members were prepared to take industrial action. An emergency motion on the issue is due to be debated later at the Congress."

### **UK glass workers reject pay offer**

Workers at glass manufacturer Ardagh Glass in the UK are to strike after rejecting a company pay offer. A ballot of Unite and GMB trade union members rejected a 5.5 percent rise over two years.

Ardagh Glass employs around 1,300 people at four factories in Barnsley, Doncaster and Knottingley in Yorkshire, and Irvine in Ayrshire.

Twenty-four-hour stoppages are due to take place at all four sites from September 16 to September 21, Unite said.

Strikes planned for last month were suspended by the union following Ardagh Glass's new pay offer. A spokesman for Unite in Yorkshire said the union was willing to hold further talks with Ardagh Glass before the present strike dates.

### **Middle East**

### **Israeli union body declares dispute at Clal Insurance**

On Monday, the Histadrut (General Trade Union Federation in Israel) declared an industrial dispute at Clal Insurance Enterprises Holdings, involving around 3,500 employees.

"The labor dispute was declared in response to the foot dragging in the collective negotiations, which have been going on for six months without any signs of progress," stated the Histadrut.

Histadrut division chairman Avi Nissenkoren called on management "to enter into real and practical negotiations, and to discuss with us in full all the issues in dispute in order to settle the employees' job terms and to strengthen the company."

### **Turkish metal workers agree on action**

Workers in Türk Metal (Union of Turkish Metal Workers), affiliated to Türk-?? (the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions), have decided to go on strike as the collective bargaining rounds ended up in disagreement between unions organised in metal industry and MESS (the Association of Turkish Metalware Industrialists).

Türk Metal said it demanded a 0.4 liras increase for its members, who earn less than 5.5 liras per hour, and then 18 percent increase for all for the first six months. MESS proposed a 4.6 percent increase for the first six months. A statement from the union said, "MESS's proposal is equal to 2 liras daily, which is totally unacceptable".

According to the union, MESS forces workers to accept flexible work and attempt to cut bonuses in different complicated formulas.

Türk Metal announced last week that the strike would start in 60 days. The strike would involve around 115,000 workers in most of metal plants across the country, including Renault, Tofa?, Arçelik, Otokar, Karsan, Mercedes Benz, MAN, Ford Otosan, Compenanta, Türk Traktör, Delphi, Çolako?lu, Borusan Mannesman, Gamak, and Eti Alüminyum.

Çelik-?? (Union of Iron, Steel, Metal and Metalware Workers), which is affiliated to Hak-??, another confederation, also took the same decision.

### **Iraqi workers stage protests over dismissals**

Workers across Iraq organised a number of protests in recent weeks over the dismissal of 200 workers by the State Company of the Leather Industries. Despite threats by the company and attempts to block demonstrations either outside or inside company premises, workers also held demonstrations in three locations in Baghdad and Kufa.

Leather workers also held a further demonstration August 27 with fired workers demanding their rights at the Ministry of Industry. The protests took place under the aegis of the Federation of Workers Councils & Unions of Iraq.

### **Africa**

### **Ghanaian university teaching staff protest salary discrepancies**

Teaching staff in all six public Ghanaian universities have gone on strike. They are represented by the Teachers and Education Workers Union (TEWU). Their action is a result of the Fair Wages and Salaries Commission failure to address salary discrepancies following the introduction last year of the Single Spine Salary Structure.

## South African car retail workers strike

Car retail workers in South Africa, including petrol pump attendants, have gone on strike. The workers are represented by the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), and their demands include a double-digit pay increase, a shift allowance and a ban on the use of labour brokers.

The strikers also include auto component manufacturing workers. Auto workers have just returned to work after a three-week strike, winning an 11.5 percent pay increase. The car manufacturers say auto production could be affected again as they only carry around four days' supply of components.

## South Sudan bank workers strike

Bank workers employed by Kenya Commercial Bank in its 20 branches in South Sudan went on strike Monday of this week. Amongst their demands are a 50 percent pay increase, payment of transport allowances and a hardship stipend.

## Nigerian Labour Congress condemns arrests

The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) issued a statement this week condemning the arrest of officials of the National Union of Banks, Insurance and Financial Institutions Employees (NUBIFIE) when they picketed the head office of the Diamond Bank in Lagos.

Union officials and bank workers were demanding improved working conditions and the re-instatement of 200 Diamond Bank workers, sacked for taking industrial action.

## Kenyan city workers defy court order

Nairobi county workers went on strike last week in defiance of a court order that they should return to work. They were demanding the payment of a 50 percent increase in benefits that had previously been promised in a collective bargaining agreement.

Kenya County Government Workers Union representatives met at Labour Ministry offices Wednesday, but according to press reports, no agreement was reached. Protesting workers have been tear-gassed when confronted by police. Amongst the workers taking part in the strike are health workers at the Pumwani Maternity Hospital.

## Kenyan county workers set for action

Around 1,000 workers at Uasin Gishu County in western Kenya have threatened to go on strike over non-payment of wages. Revenue collectors at retail and wholesale markets and car park attendants are amongst the municipal workers set to strike. They are members of the Kenya County Workers Union.

## South African university staff end strike

Staff at the Walter Sisulu University in Eastern Cape have returned to work. They began their strike at the end of July in pursuit of an 8 to 10 percent pay increase. Management had offered 4.25 percent. The workers have returned to work after the University upped its offer to 5 percent.

## South African gold miners may strike

Gold miners represented by the Association for Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) have rejected a final offer from employers of 7.5 to 8 percent pay increase and are holding out for a minimum R12,500 (\$US1,270) salary.

However, ACMU officials say they will continue talks with the employers' representatives. A recent three-day strike by gold miners represented by the National Union of Mineworkers was ended when the NUM accepted the 7.5 to 8 percent offer.



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