

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

20 September 2012

Europe

Greek state workers in 48-hour strike

Thousands of workers began a 48-hour strike Wednesday against plans to fire thousands of public sector employees.

The government plans to place 25,000 civil servants on a reduced salary before being redeployed or dismissed, with 15,000 jobs to go by 2015, adding to already record levels of unemployment.

The strike, called by the public sector association ADEDY, included teachers and doctors, shutting schools and forcing hospitals to operate with only emergency staff.

At least 9,000 workers, gathered in front of parliament in the central Syntagma Square, in Athens. A number of striking school guards clashed with riot police outside the Ministry for Administrative Reform in the capital.

The job cuts are part of bailout conditions for the next €1 billion of Greece's loan set by the troika—the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Representatives of the troika return to Athens next week to check on the progress of the government's austerity measures.

Spanish teachers announce day of protest

Teachers across Spain have called for a day of industrial action in October against further cuts in education, tighter rules for scholarships, increasing tuition fees and other so-called "reforms."

According to *theleader.info*: "The Plataforma Estatal por la Escuela Pública, an organisation composed of parents, students and teaching unions, has announced a general strike on the 24th of October, on which day they hope to bring together widespread support for the education sector from all levels of society."

Italian bank staff threaten action

Italy's largest banks unilaterally pulled out of a labour contract with more than 300,000 employees on Monday, prompting a threat of strikes

"Lenders' group ABI annulled the current collective deal more than nine months before it expires in mid-2014, sending a message it wants substantial cost cuts in the next agreement," according to *Reuters*.

ABI sent a letter to unions saying that falling profits and the need to set aside more capital because of regulatory requirements were behind the decision. It said that early exit from the contract would give the two sides more time to negotiate before next year's June deadline.

Italy is experiencing its longest recession since the end of World War II. According to *Reuters*, some 19,000 jobs have been cut in the financial sector since 2011. It is expected that this could rise to as much as 35,000.

Firefighters in England and Wales confirm four hour walk-out

Firefighters in England and Wales will go on strike September 25 in a dispute over pensions, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has confirmed. Firefighters in Scotland will not be part of the strike.

Government changes to the current pension arrangements will mean firefighters who retire or are forced out of work at 55 years of age could lose up to 50 percent of their pensions, according to the FBU.

Of those who voted in England, Wales and Scotland, 78 percent were in favour of strike action.

Care staff at Glasgow homeless centres return to work after wildcat strike

Staff at Glasgow homeless centres that took part in unofficial strike action have returned to work on the understanding that a strike ballot will be organized. Part of the agreement involved the reinstatement of a suspended worker with the agreement that no action will be taken against her.

Around 400 staff at Glasgow's three homelessness centres were sent letters this week threatening them with the sack if they didn't return to work after they staged an unofficial walkout following the suspension of a colleague.

The wildcat strike was the first action of its kind to hit the city council in almost a decade.

Glasgow council threatened the public sector trade union Unison that unless it declared the strike unofficial it would be sued.

The strike was apparently triggered when a female staff member refused to take on a case involving a 16-year-old youth and was sent home.

The *Herald Scotland* said, "Staff insiders said the demand on the woman was a breach of an agreement struck with management over staff shortages.

"Efforts to resolve the situation include offering to reinstate the suspended worker on the basis she resumes full duties with no disciplinary action taken."

Glasgow is pushing through £42.6 million in budget cuts, with social work and education bearing the brunt.

Scottish oil refinery workers in strike ballot

The Unite union sent out strike ballots September 13 to its members at the PetroIneos' Grangemouth oil refinery in Scotland over a dispute with management about terms and conditions, and pension provision.

BP tanker drivers went on strike for three days in February at the refinery over a plan to transfer some of them to another employer, which would have affected their pensions and pay.

PetroIneos, which produces 210,000 barrels per day, is jointly owned by PetroChina and INEOS Group Holding SA.

Low pay protest by UK cleaning workers

Cleaning workers in Kensington and Chelsea, the richest borough in England, began two days of strikes on Monday over pay.

The 69 workers are employed by the Facilities Management provider OCS on a subcontract from Kensington & Chelsea Tenants' Management Organisation (TMO). They are paid just £7.18 an hour and are demanding £8.55 per hour.

Also on Monday, cleaning workers employed by the contractor ISS on the East Coast Mainline rail route walked out demanding £8.55 an hour and improvements to their working conditions and pensions.

ISS last year made a pre-tax profit of £7.5 million. Over the last ten years the company paid an average of just £41,400 in corporation tax, while in the last five years it has paid more than £5 million a year to shareholders.

Post Office managers vote for pay fight

The Unite union announced September 13 that Post Office managers had voted for industrial action in a dispute over pay.

Post Office managers rejected a three-year non-pensionable pay deal. The ballot resulted in a vote of 52 percent in favour of strike action and 68 percent in favour of action short of a strike.

Bus workers in Warrington, England begin series of strikes

Bus workers at Network Warrington staged the first in a series of strikes, September 13, in a dispute over pay.

For the first time in 16 years, staff at the bus company were told there would be no annual pay rise this year. The drivers also say the action has been taken because of their concerns about the way the company is being run.

The workers will walk out one day a week for the next seven weeks in a move that has paralysed the majority of buses.

Middle East

Construction workers protest in Saudi Arabia

££Over 700 workers employed on the Al-Shemaysi construction project gathered at Abdullah Financial District in Riyadh September 12 to protest low wages, delayed payment and the employer's failure to renew official work permits.

It is the third such protest. A large number of security personnel were present at the site.

"The workers' demanded that they be paid their salaries at the end of the month without delay, as well as increasing their monthly wages. The workers were also protesting against the failure to renew their residency permits, which had expired," said *arabnews.com*.

Both Saudi and non-Saudi employees were involved in the protests, a source said.

Africa

Tunisian journalists hold one day strike

Journalists in Tunisia held a one day strike on Tuesday to protest the prosecution of Zied el-Heni who was held in pre-trial detention last Friday after accusing the public prosecutor of fabricating evidence.

Heni, who was released on bail on Monday, accused the prosecutor of fabricating evidence to frame a cameraman who had been filming an incident in which a man threw an egg at a minister. The cameraman was eventually released after three weeks while the egg thrower remains in custody.

In a separate case radio anchorman Zouhaer al-Jiss was summoned to court accused of defaming public officials. He had been hosting a discussion programme in which one guest criticised the Tunisian president.

The International Federation of Journalists sent a message of support to the striking journalists.

Ugandan school teachers in national walk-out

Around 160,000 Ugandan teachers went on a nationwide strike on Monday in pursuit of a 20 percent pay increase. The teachers are represented by the Uganda National Teachers Union (UNATU).

A promised pay rise by the government has not materialised. Teachers are among the worst paid public sector workers in Uganda. On average primary teachers earn Sh250,000 (\$97) a month and secondary teachers Sh450,000 (\$175) a month. The government claims it is unable to finance pay increases following cuts in aid donations.

Nigeria: strike to defend national minimum wage legislation

Workers under the umbrella of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) held a one-day strike Tuesday to protest a parliamentary proposal to weaken minimum wage legislation.

Currently, the federal government sets the minimum wage figure currently set at N18,000 (\$113) which in theory all state governments are obliged to enforce. Under the proposals being floated, each state

government would be free to set its own minimum wage figure, and end a nationally set minimum wage. The NLC and TUC will consider other actions if the proposals are not dropped.

South African gold miners reject pay deal

The Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) representing over 70 percent of gold miners has rejected the employers latest pay offer and threatened strike action.

The offer would see some workers, including drill operators, receive an eight percent pay increase and others a 7.5 percent increase.

Other unions representing the gold miners, including the National Union of Mineworkers, have accepted the offer.

The employers' body, the Chamber of Mines, stated a strike by AMCU would be unprotected and that there would be no further talks.

South African car retail workers action continues

The strike of car retail workers, including petrol pump attendants and those producing auto components, is continuing. The workers are represented by the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA). They are seeking a double-digit pay increase whilst the employers have offered 7.5 percent.

Talks between the union and employers representatives are ongoing. The strike is now beginning to affect auto manufacturers as the supply of components is beginning to dry up.



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