

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

25 October 2013

Europe

Anti-austerity march through Rome

An estimated 25,000 marched through Rome on Saturday against austerity measures, including cuts to welfare programs and a shortage in low-income housing.

Protesters reportedly threw eggs and firecrackers at the Finance Ministry as the demonstration marched past.

Over 4,000 riot police were deployed, making 11 arrests. The Associated Press said, "There were moments of tension when demonstrators passed near the headquarters of an extreme-right group, but police intervened when a few bottles were thrown." The day before, a 24-hour nationwide strike disrupted travel. Airports in Rome, Naples, Milan and Bologna were forced to cancel some flights. Some school and health workers also went on strike.

A protest of around 600 workers also took place in Milan.

Thousands of workers protest Portugal austerity

Thousands of Portuguese workers protested in the country's two largest cities on October 19 against the government's proposed 2014 budget. The conservative ruling party aims to slash the budget deficit to 4 percent of GDP next year from 5.9 percent in 2013.

Workers at the protests in Lisbon and Porto angrily opposed the government's plans to impose further spending cuts, reductions in state pensions and the slashing of public-sector workers' wages. Workers face cuts in wages of between 2.5 percent and 12 percent on monthly salaries of over 600 euros. Pensions are expected to be slashed by a total of 728 million euros.

The Lisbon protest was organised by the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers. In Porto, thousands of workers demonstrated in the city's main square.

Many demanded the resignation of the government. Al-Jazeera reported the comments of an unemployed teacher, Sofia, who said, "I'm here to fight for more work and better wages and against this government's austerity measures, so I want them to leave together with the Troika [European Commission, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank]".

Ricardo Pereira who travelled to Lisbon to protest from Torres Novas said, "I'm here to fight for a better future for me and for the next generation and against this government's austerity measures."

The ruling party lost 12 percent of its vote in recent local elections.

Greek municipal workers protest comments of finance minister in Athens

On October 17, Greek municipal employees protested in Athens against the New Democracy/PASOK government's austerity measures. Workers protested outside the offices of Finance Minister Yannis Stournaras.

Recent comments by Stournaras have angered many who are living in severe poverty. Stournaras said, "I know what it's like to live on 500 euros (a month). There are people in my family who live on very little money. My mother, my father-in-law, my mother-in-law. I know very well what this means."

Figures released earlier this month showed that 1.36 million people were unemployed in July. Greece's unemployment was more than double the euro zone's average of 12 percent in August.

Spanish appliance workers employed by Fagor protest in defence of jobs

Thousands of workers employed at Fagor, the Spanish appliance maker protested in the northern Spanish Basque town of Mondragon on October 18.

Fagor employs 5,700 people worldwide, with 2,000 in the Basque region. It is the fifth largest electrical appliance company in Europe.

On October 16 Fagor, with a total debt estimated at 1.1 billion euros, filed for protection from creditors. Under Spanish bankruptcy law. Fagor has four months to reach a deal to satisfy its creditors and restructure its debt.

During the demonstration, workers marched behind a banner reading "In defense of our jobs". AFP reported, "At the end of the march they read a manifesto warning against the devastating consequences for employment if the company closes."

Bulgarian miners in underground occupation

Around 50 miners at the Bulgarian Black Sea mine carried out a 17-hour underground protest October 15 over unpaid wages, due for more than two months.

As the miners on the night shift barricaded themselves at 300 feet below ground, almost 200 of their colleagues protested at the entrance of the mine.

The Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria (KNSB) repeatedly sent delegations to persuade the miners to end their occupation.

Workers strike at Dublin retail outlet

Workers at the Wallis retail outlet on Grafton Street, Dublin went on strike October 16 in support of their colleagues in Limerick in a dispute over redundancy payments. Staff at Wallis in Blanchardstown have voted in favour of going on strike, reported the *Irish Examiner*.

Turkish energy workers in anti-privatization march

Turkish workers marched last week from the Aegean region to the capital Ankara in a demonstration against the privatization of lignite mines and thermic power stations.

According to *industriall-union.org*: “In a series of joint actions over the past months, mine and energy workers in Yatagan, Yeniköy and Kemerköy thermal power plants have been campaigning against privatization of their workplaces.”

The article reported that around 200 miners and power plant workers marched and “stopped for local actions as well as press conferences”. It added, “When arriving in Ankara the marching mine and energy workers knocked on the door of the Turkish Parliament. Workers, together with leaders of Maden-Is and Tes-Is, publicly expressed their concerns and demands to the political representatives about the privatization.”

Middle East

Faculty staff at Israeli technical colleges in open-ended strike

Faculty at Israeli technical colleges began an open-ended strike Sunday, in a long-running dispute with the Finance Ministry over the budget for the country’s 53 trade schools.

According to the *Times of Israel*, “The colleges are asking the ministry to approve an emergency budget of NIS 140 million (\$40 million), 80 million of which will be earmarked for the current academic year and the rest which would be allocated to the schools over five years. The Finance Ministry has offered an increased budget of NIS 90 million, distributed evenly over five years.” College staff staged a multi-day hunger strike outside the Knesset last week.

Workers at Teva-Tech plant in Israel strike

The workforce at the Teva-Tech plant in the Negev went on strike Sunday against worsening pay and work conditions.

The workers have been demonstrating by the gates of the facility, located in Ramat Hovav, which belongs to Teva Pharmaceutical Industries.

Africa

Namibian retail workers end strike

One hundred members of the Namibian Wholesalers and Retail Union employed by Foschini in Namibia have ended their strike which began October 6. Their action affected stores in Oshakati, Walvis Bay, Swakopmund and Otjiwarongo. It began after negotiations over pay increases broke down. In the settlement, workers will get a N\$320 (\$33) monthly rise with the minimum salary being N\$3,000 (\$307). This was the offer first made by the company at the beginning of the strike.

Strike by Game store workers in Namibia

Workers at the Windhoek and Oshakati branches of Game in Namibia voted to strike demanding a N\$490 (\$50) pay increase, housing and transport allowances and improved conditions. Game stores sell general merchandise and non-perishable groceries.

The strike by members of the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU) began Monday. Around 40 workers at the Oshakati branch picketed the store, but most of the workers at the Windhoek store went into work following threats by management of sackings and facing worse conditions when the strike was over.

Zambia Shoprite workers return to work

The 3,000 Shoprite workers, members of the National Union of Commercial and Industrial Workers, have returned to work. They went on strike demanding the company pay the government-legislated minimum wage. Shoprite responded by firing the entire workforce. The Zambian government intervened, threatening to revoke Shoprite’s trading licence if the sackings were not overturned.

The company agreed and the workers returned to work while negotiations between the company and the union continue. The government has ordered that the dispute be resolved within ten days. Zambia represents Shoprite’s biggest market outside of its South Africa home base.

Ghanaian university teachers suspend action

Members of the Teachers and Educational Workers Union in public universities suspended their strike on Monday and returned to work.

This followed intervention by university vice chancellors to press the Fair Wages and Salary Commission to begin negotiations with the union to resolve their issue. Their action started in September over pay differentials between junior and senior staff and for the restoration of allowances previously paid.

Kenyan local government workers threaten strike

The 600 plus workers employed by Migori county government in Kenya threatened to strike this week over salary arrears due since 2010.

Speaking at a press conference at the end of last week the vice chair of the Migori County Government Workers Union, George Owino told

reporters, “We gave a 14-day notice followed by a week’s notice with our demands, which have been ignored by the county government. Our attempt to get answers have been thwarted.”

Kenyan hospital workers set to strike if pay agreement not kept

Nursing and other hospital workers at Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital in Eldoret have threatened to come out on strike November 1 if the Sh800 million (\$9.4m) owed them from a previous collective bargaining agreement (CBA) does not appear in their pay packets by the end of this month.

A strike scheduled for September this year was called off after the government agreed to implement the CBA, but the government reneged on its promise. They should have received a 24 percent pay increase together with increases in housing and commuting allowances.

Nigerian power workers threaten to shut down supply

The Nigerian Union of Electricity Employees has threatened to close down power supplies if the 40,000 workers due to leave the recently privatised Power Holding Company of Nigeria are not paid their severance allowances and pensions. The government has responded with threats to use the army to evict power workers and maintain electricity supplies.

Nigerian lecturers strike now in fourth month

Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan pleaded with striking lecturers, represented by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) to call off a nationwide strike now entering its fourth month. He claimed his government was trying to meet the demands of the lecturers.

Lecturers are demanding the federal government implement its agreement signed with the union in 2009. They marched in Ile-Ife, in Osun state to the palace of the Ooni of Ife. A planned march in Calabar did not go ahead when 200 police, some heavily armed, prevented it.



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