

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

13 December 2013

## Greek teachers and doctors protest

On Wednesday, several thousand Greek teachers protested in Athens to protest cuts in their pay.

The cuts have been imposed as part of the austerity programme carried out by successive governments over the past four years. The protest coincided with the Greek government reopening talks with the troika—the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank, and European Commission.

Greek doctors joined the protest as part of a 24-hour strike in opposition to cuts to their pay and the merger of state hospitals.

On Tuesday, Health Minister Adonis Georgiadis announced that 4,500 doctors working for Greece's main public health care provider, EOPYY, will be given the option of taking up jobs at state hospitals or having their contracts terminated. The government has been tasked by the troika with imposing the attacks to meet targets for the civil service mobility scheme and public sector job losses.

Georgiadis stated, "The memorandum [agreement with the troika] was absolutely necessary. It foresees the minimum reforms that the country needs. In fact, the memorandum's schedule is very slow. We should be going faster."

By the end of the month, the government has to fire 4,000 civil servants and have 25,000 workers in the mobility scheme. Once in the mobility scheme, workers face forced transfers to other jobs and the threat of eventual unemployment.

## University staff in Athens continue strike

On Wednesday, administrative workers at Athens University extended their strike until Friday. Administrative workers at a number of universities, including Athens, are fighting against the halving of personnel and the transfer of 1,400 employees into the civil service mobility scheme.

Under the scheme, they would receive just 75 percent of their regular pay for a period of eight months. They would be evaluated to determine whether they will be transferred or sacked.

Athens University students have occupied university faculties in protest at the government's plans.

On Monday, staff at the National Technical University of Athens called off their 13-week strike. According to *Kathimerini*, they were to meet management on Thursday, but it "remains unclear which of the staff can return to their posts."

## Finnish baby food factory workers strike

On Wednesday, Nestle workers at a baby food plant in Turku, Finland, began a three-day strike over plans by management to employ workers with temporary contracts through a third party.

The facility has a workforce of around 110 employees, of whom around 20 have temporary contracts, according to the just-food.com web site.

The Finnish Food Workers' Union, SEL, said many of these temporary workers had been employed at the site "for years". A union official called on the company to recognise "its responsibility" towards the temporary staff and cancel its plans.

Nestle told just-food it would offer permanent contracts to seven Turku factory employees who are currently on temporary contracts, from 2014. "The remainder of the employees who have had temporary contracts will in the future be employed by a third party," the spokesperson explained.

Nestle said it required less temporary workers, stating, "People work in shifts at the factory and temporary workers have been working in the fourth shifts. In 2014 there will no longer be a need for many fourth shift weeks due to increased productivity from investments made in the factory."

## Firefighters in England to continue strikes

Firefighters in England and Wales are to strike for eight hours December 13 and December 14 in an ongoing dispute with the government over pensions. The workers are to strike from 6 p.m. The action follows four similar token strikes of a few hours' duration by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) since September.

Under government plans, firefighters will get their full pension at 60 years of age, up from 55 for those employed before 2006. Individual pension contributions will also increase. Those forced out of work at 55 because they are no longer deemed fit could lose up to half of their pension.

The FBU stated, "Firefighters taking home £1,650 a month and paying £340 a month into the pension scheme face a retirement pension of £9,000 a year if they are unable to meet the physical demands of the job after age 55—even if they have been paying into the fund for 35 years."

Pension contributions for firefighters in England have just been increased for the third year in a row to 14.2 percent of pay.

The BBC reported that "firefighters in Scotland have not been taking part in the strikes while the union considers proposals from the Scottish government on fitness requirements."

## **Strike by Marks & Spencer store workers called off after one day in Republic of Ireland**

A strike by Marks & Spencer store workers was called off after one day when the company agreed to talks on pensions.

At least 2,000 staff went on strike on December 7 at Marks & Spencer's retail stores after voting almost unanimously to take action in response to the closure of a pension scheme at the major retailer.

The strike shut the majority of the company's 17 stores including its flagship store on Grafton Street in Dublin.

According to the Mandate trade union, management attempted to open two of the smaller outlets in Athlone and Navan using temporary, seasonal staff.

The Marks & Spencer's defined benefit pension scheme was shut down by the corporation on October 31 with just two weeks' notice to staff. The company told staff the scheme has a projected deficit of €12.6 million even though it is currently around €17.5m in surplus.

Workers are also protesting plans to drop the Sunday pay rate and the elimination of a Christmas bonus.

Ireland: Aer Lingus threatens legal action against union over ballot

The Irish national carrier Aer Lingus has threatened to take legal action against the SIPTU trade union if it proceeds with a ballot for industrial action in a dispute over the pension scheme.

SIPTU has announced proposals for a ballot for industrial action at the Dublin Airport Authority and Aer Lingus, which share a joint pension scheme—the Irish Aviation Superannuation Scheme—that has a deficit of around €780 million.

The union has made it clear it will not take any industrial action until well after the Christmas period.

## **Egyptian doctors plan “partial strike” from new year’s day**

Egyptian doctors are planning a “partial strike” on January 1, following a decision taken during an emergency session of the General Assembly of the Doctors' Syndicate on Friday.

According to *Daily News Egypt*, “A statement by the syndicate indicated that the doctors unanimously voted to back the draft Staff Law which would organise financial, administrative and technical affairs for all medical professionals.”

The statement read: “The General Assembly approved of taking escalatory measures to pressure concerned authorities to implement the law in order to improve health care services offered to citizens.”

The strike is over the Staff Law and other demands.

A partial strike beginning on October 1, 2012, lasted more than 80 days, ending with the understanding that the drafting and implementation of the Staff Law would follow soon after.

“The draft law was submitted to the People's Assembly, but was not approved before the legislature was dissolved. In early 2013, the modified version was handed to the Shura Council, the country's only legislature at the time, but again, the legislature did not survive to pass the law,” said *Daily News Egypt*.

## **Iranian reed cutters strike**

On Sunday, around 650 Iranian seasonal reed cutters at the Hafte Tapeh

Agro-Industrial Company stopped work in protest at management's failure to honour its pledges of pay raises and other benefits.

Workers say management had agreed to their demands during the visit they made to Tehran last year, but since then they have not lived up to their commitments, so the workers are now “sitting in the plantations” and waiting until their demands are met.

The head of the Khuzestan Province Workers House confirmed the strike, saying it was mainly over the call for a pay raise and an equal level of insurance for all workers.

## **UN Relief staff in Gaza stage partial strike**

Staff at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in the Gaza Strip staged a partial strike Tuesday to urge the organisation to adhere to an agreement it signed that would see employees receive a wage increase for the first time in two years.

According to the *Ma'an News Agency*, “Employees also urged the UN agency to reimburse them over the wage loss caused by the currently low exchange rates of the US dollar, which negatively affects their salaries.”

The UNRWA was also urged to reemploy 95 engineers who were discharged under the pretext that their contracts expired because construction material isn't available in the coastal enclave.

## **Namibian fishery workers strike enters second week**

The strike by fishery workers at NovaNam fishing company is now in its second week. They are members of the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU). Nearly three quarters of the 2,000 staff are taking part in the action.

Their demands are for a pay rise of 5.8 percent for the current year and 6 percent next year, annual bonuses, payment of medical and housing allowances and for 100 temporary workers to be made permanent each year.

Initially, NAFAU was demanding a 7 percent increase and the company offered 5.8 percent, but in the course of negotiations, NovaNam cut the offer to 4 percent and then revoked the negotiations. The union has declared it will return to its original demand for a 7 percent increase if the company continues to stall negotiations.

## **Hunger strike by Kenyan supermarket staff**

Staff of the nationwide Tuskys group of supermarkets began a hunger strike last Friday, after the company failed to implement a recently agreed Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). The more than 6,000 employees are represented by the Kenya Union of Commercial Food and Allied Workers Union.

The workers were due to strike in mid-November in support of a pay claim, increased leave and other benefits; however, it was called off on the day it was due to start with the employer signing the CBA with the union. Amongst the terms of the CBA were an immediate 10 percent pay increase and a further 11 percent in 2014.

However, when Tuskys operatives received this month's pay, it was less than before the CBA was signed. Speaking to the press, a union official

employed at the Eldoret branch of Tuskys explained, “Instead of getting an increment we have been deducted huge sums of money; the management is claiming that it has just deducted the pay of an hour that we have a lunch break.”

He added that they do not take a lunch break of an hour only taking 15 minutes and eat their lunch whilst working.

### **Court orders temporary halt to Kenyan health workers’ strike**

The High Court in Kenya issued an order Wednesday temporarily halting a strike by health workers who came out on an indefinite strike this week. Unions representing health workers said they would not call off the strike without their demands being met.

The walkout includes doctors represented by the Kenya Medical Practitioners, Pharmacists and Dentists Union (KMPDU) and nursing staff belonging to the Kenya National Union of Nurses (KNUN). In all, more than 100,000 health workers are involved in the action, which is having a big impact on health care provision.

The strike is in response to the central government’s decision to devolve the budget for health services to county governments. The unions are not necessarily against devolution of health budgets but are concerned the budgets are being devolved in a hasty and unplanned manner. Many of the county governments lack the skills and administrative capacity to successfully administer health finance.

Medical and nursing staff are concerned that the dumping of the health budgets onto local government will lead to confusion and salary cuts.

### **Nigerian lecturers’ union preparing to end strike**

University staff belonging to the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) may soon end their long-running strike. The national strike began on July 1 as they demanded the federal government honour a 2009 agreement to improve conditions and pour money into tertiary education’s infrastructure.

Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan had threatened to sack strikers unless they returned to work on December 9. However, this week, ASUU president Dr. Nasir Fagge met with Ministry of Education officials in Abuja and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU). It is reported that the MOU covers most of the lecturers’ demands and includes a non-victimisation clause.

ASUU will hold a meeting of its National Executive Council next week to consider the MOU and decide the next course of action.



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