

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

21 February 2014

## Europe

### Spanish Coca-Cola employees march to oppose closures

On Saturday thousands of Coca-Cola workers and their supporters marched through Madrid to oppose the company's plans to close four out of its eleven plants in Spain with the loss of nearly 1,300 jobs. Currently the firm employs 4,000 staff in Spain. The plants slated for closure are in Fuenlabrada near Madrid, Palma, Oviedo and Alicante.

### UK hospital staff on 48-hour strike

One hundred and fifty workers employed by Compass Medirest at Ealing Hospital began a 48-hour strike at 7:00 a.m. on Wednesday as part of their ongoing campaign against low pay and conditions. They have already held a 48-hour strike beginning Wednesday 12 February. They are members of the GMB union and voted by a 98 percent majority to carry out the action.

Compass Medirest employees carry out domestic, cleaning, portering and help desk duties. The work was outsourced to Compass Medirest, creating a two-tier pay regime. They are currently paid the minimum wage of £6.31 (\$10.50) an hour. Their demands are for a pay increase towards a London living wage of £8.80 (\$14.70) an hour, two additional days leave and payment of sick pay.

### UK ambulance staff strike

Ambulance staff employed by the Yorkshire Ambulance Service (YAS) held their fourth day of action last Monday when they went out on strike for five hours beginning at 3:00 p.m. It was in opposition to plans by YAS to bring in new shift patterns that would mean employees working up to ten hours without a meal break, which the Unite union says would put patients at potential risk.

Those taking part are members of Unite. Unite represents a minority of YAS ambulance staff, the majority being organised by Unison. YAS does not recognise Unite in negotiations.

### Cypriot workers protest privatisation plans

Last Friday workers at the state owned telecom company CyTA and the Cyprus Ports Authority held a 24-hour strike to oppose privatisation. On the same day staff at state-controlled Electricity Authority held a 12-hour strike opposing privatisation plans.

The government agreed to carry through the privatisations to qualify for the next tranche of European Union €10 billion (\$13.7 billion) bailout money. The Cypriot government must raise €1.4 billion (\$1.9 billion) through privatisations between 2016 and 2018 to receive the money.

### Cypriot staff at British bases strike

Cypriot workers at UK Sovereign Base Areas (SBA) held a 24-hour strike on Tuesday. Striking employees at the Akrotiri base prevented access for two and a half hours and only lifted this after the base authorities threatened to use force to end the blockade.

Christos Tziapouras, a union rep for the SBA staff, accused the British authorities of using Cyprus's financial crisis to break collective agreements and cut pay and benefits while British employees were given a pay rise last August. He added that 350 Cypriot employees have lost their jobs over the last four years, replaced by English dependents.

### Georgia: Walk-out by gold and copper miners goes ahead

A strike by miners employed by RMG Copper and RMG Gold in Kazreti went ahead last Friday, with reports of over 500 workers walking out. Their demands include a doubling of wages from \$400 to \$800 a month and improved working conditions. They say their health and safety is severely compromised by the current set-up. The ores they mine contain chemicals that have been linked to cancers. In addition their demands include the reinstatement of 184 men previously fired.

On Monday the president of the miners' union, Tamaz Dolaberidze, said the police presence around the pickets had intensified and that RMG management had been calling each worker personally saying their issues would be addressed and they should return to work.

### Bus drivers' strike in Georgia

The strike by bus workers in the city of Batumi has now entered its second week. Two of the drivers have begun a hunger strike. They are demanding the resignation of Batumi's municipal bus company's head of

administration, Gia Loria. On Monday 20 bus drivers employed by Tbilisi municipal authority joined the Batumi drivers' picket line to show their solidarity.

### **Union pushes for “mediation” in Irish electricians’ dispute**

More than 6,000 electricians, members of the Technical and Engineering and Electrical Union (TEEU), voted recently for strike action by a 94 percent majority to oppose plans by employers to cut their wages.

However, at the end of last week TEEU General Secretary Eamon Devoy welcomed the intervention of the Labour Relations Commission, which proposed a Registered Employment Agreement as a way “of restoring stability in the electrical contracting” industry. Under the proposals the two employers’ bodies would withdraw the planned 10 percent pay cuts and the TEEU would in turn withdraw its 4.9 percent pay claim. Instead, negotiations would proceed through the newly proposed employment agreement.

Devoy added that “the decision to undertake strategic strikes will remain in place against employers who remain non-compliant with the national collective agreement for the electrical contracting industry.” **Middle East**

### **Egyptian textile workers continue action**

The strike by Mahalla Spinning and Weaving has continued into its second week. Demands include payment of bonuses overdue, for the implementation of a minimum wage, and the removal of Fouad Abdel-Alim, who oversees public textile companies.

On Tuesday, delegations of workers at the Mahalla Spinning and Weaving Company, along with six other of the 32 textile companies which come under the Textile Holding Company, as well as Workers Union head Gebaly Al-Maraghy, were due to meet with the Minister of Investment.

### **Israel: Some Hadassah hospital staff return to work**

Nurses and administrative staff were set to return to normal duties last Wednesday at the Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem, after talks between management and the employees. They had been on strike for the last two weeks, demanding the government finance the hospital to cover its debts, including pay arrears owed to the staff.

However, doctors were not part of the agreement. They fear being sued by patients for damages after the hospital itself was granted a court order protecting it from having to pay out for lawsuits. Hundreds of hospital staff had occupied the hospital lobby Tuesday night to press their demands.

### **Jordan teachers strike over stabbing incident**

Teachers at Tafileh comprehensive secondary school went on strike Monday following a stabbing incident the previous day. The head of the school admin office was reportedly stabbed by a student seeking his exam

results.

### **Palestinian lawyers dispute**

On Thursday of last week, lawyers in the West Bank organised by the Palestinian Lawyers’ Union went on strike and picketed court buildings. The lawyers are demanding amendments in the legislative system. Among their demands are that court hearings should be held with just one judge instead of the current panel of three, that judges show citizens and lawyers respect in court and that judges’ work hours should be increased from the current three hours a day to address the large number of pending lawsuits.

### **Africa**

### **Zambian government confirms dismissal of nurses**

Last week the Zambian government confirmed the dismissal of 500 nurses who had taken part in a nationwide strike last year. The government refused all requests for their reinstatement. The nurses are members of the Zambian Union of Nurses Organisation (ZUNO). The Labour Minister, Fackson Shamenda, described the nurses as criminals. They were originally fired after their strike in November last year, which affected all major hospitals.

### **Strike by South Sudan medical staff**

Doctors at the El Fashler Teaching Hospital in North Darfur, Sudan have gone on strike demanding the payment of their allowances. Fifty-three doctors at the hospital embarked on an indefinite strike on Thursday. Allowances amounting to SDG120 (\$21) per month for specialist interns and SGD150 (\$26) for general practitioners in-house doctors, have gone unpaid for over three months.

The general practitioners are not carrying out any duties on Friday and Saturday until after 2:00 p.m. The Ministry of Health is reported to owe the doctors SDG280million (\$49 million) in allowances and bonuses from last August. Doctors went on strike at Nyala hospital, South Darfur in November demanding the payment of arrears covering several years, housing allowance, an improved working environment and additional new medical staff.

### **Liberian health workers on go-slow**

Health workers of Liberia went on a go-slow on Monday that is said to have paralysed most Liberian hospitals. One report suggested that at various hospitals and other medical facilities throughout the country the situation was catastrophic. At The Redemption hospital in New Kru town, all patients were discharged and the place looked like a ghost town.

The health workers came out last year at the same time for the same reasons. Recently the Liberian president, Helen Sirleaf, promised to bring all those volunteers not paid by the health ministry onto the payroll with the proviso that the “incentive system has to be combined with the payroll because you cannot get them both because the donors have pulled back.”

The health workers said they would not be returning to work unless nine demands are met. They include better wages and placing the volunteers on the health ministry payroll. The health minister has threatened to dismiss the protesting health workers and said those that do not turn up to work will not get paid.



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