

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

21 November 2014

Europe

Thousands protest austerity in Greece

Around 40,000 Greek students, pensioners and workers marched through Athens on Monday. They were commemorating the anniversary of the bloody attack on a student revolt by the then Greek junta in 1973. They used the occasion to protest against the ongoing austerity measures being imposed by the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Their march took them past the US embassy, which had supported the Greek army junta. Marchers shouted slogans; “EU, IMF out”. The police had a heavy presence with around 7,000 officers.

During the demonstration, some protestors were attacked by police with teargas.

A 24-hour strike has been called by the largest Greek unions for November 27 in opposition to proposed job cuts and attacks on pensions. Dozens of such strikes have been held by the union federations since 2010. They are designed to allow workers to disperse their anger, while the collaboration of the unions with successive governments has ensured the passage of successive austerity programmes.

UK defence staff on four-day walkout

Members of the Unite trade union, working for the Defence Support Group (DSG), began a four-day strike on Monday. DSG is responsible for repairing and maintaining the UK’s Ministry of Defence equipment including vehicles. The staff, employed in sites across Britain, rejected the one percent pay increase offer by DSG, which is to be sold to the private-sector in the coming period.

UK car workers threaten strike

More than 95 percent of the 12,881 car workers employed by Jaguar Land Rover company in its five car plants across the UK, have voted to reject the company’s 14 percent pay offer over three years.

The company is owned by the Indian conglomerate, Tata. The employees are members of the Unite trade union, which says it will now ballot for industrial action.

It is more than 20 years since there has been major strike action in the

UK car industry.

Staff at UK engineering firm reject derisory pay offer

More than 160 staff at the Swedish-owned engineering company Trelleborg Industrial AVS in Leicester, began a two-day strike Wednesday. The company manufactures specialised parts for trains.

Workers are protesting a derisory 1.7 percent pay offer from the company. The two-day action follows a 24-hour strike last week.

Campaigners shut down UK power station site over blacklisting

On Monday, around 50 campaigners blockaded the site of the building of a new gas-fired power station at Carrington, near Salford in Greater Manchester. They were protesting the alleged blacklisting of a local man, a scaffolder active in the Unite union. Power workers respected the picket line and did not go on to the site.

Irish Water workers oppose company plans to scrap bonus

Around 100 Irish Water employees, representing a quarter of the company’s permanent staff, are opposing the plans by management to scrap bonus payments due to them for the last two years.

Members of the public sector SIPTU union, the workers rely on the bonus to supplement their wages of between 25,000—40,000 euro (\$31,300 to \$50,000). The union says it should have the right to negotiate the changes.

Union agrees to remove picket line at Irish building site

Following a high court order, the Unite union has agreed to remove a picket of an apartment building in West Dublin. The building is owned by the National Asset Management Agency. The refurbishment work is being carried out by the building company JJ Rhatigan.

There is an ongoing dispute at the site over the use of subcontractors by Rhatigan, which began in October. Bricklayers previously held a sit-in atop a crane 200 feet above the ground. One of those taking part in the

crane protest at the time told the *Irish Times*, “We’re being paid €4.90 (US\$6.25) an hour which is well below the minimum wage. This is a government job. It’s taxpayers’ money that’s paying for this job.”

Italian workers demonstrate against job “reforms”

On November 14, Italian workers held strikes and demonstrations against government plans to amend Article 18 job protection legislation. Those involved included the metal workers union FIOM-CGIL, as well as students and protestors who held marches throughout Italy including Rome, Milan, Naples and Palermo.

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi is seeking to change the law offering workers protection against dismissal, in a bid to offer up the Italian working class as a source of cheap labour.

Italian union announces general strike

The Italian Labour Union (UIL), representing around two million members across the public and private sectors, has announced it will mount a general strike over the government’s refusal to give civil servants a pay rise in 2015.

The UIL union is currently consulting the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) and the Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (CISL) union federations before announcing a date for the action.

Bus and tram drivers in Swiss city of Geneva walk out

Tram and bus drivers in Geneva held a 24-hour strike on Wednesday. They are employed by the Geneva Public Transport system, TPG.

They voted by a 93 percent majority to take the action against TPG’s plans to make 100 drivers redundant. Workers say that while public transport use is rising, there is a shortfall of approximately 130 drivers, leaving those available struggling to cope with the workload.

Protests in Hungarian capital

Around 10,000 protestors held an anti-government rally in front of the parliament building in the Hungarian capital Budapest Monday. They were protesting the alleged corruption by Ildiko Vida, head of the tax authority, and the refusal of the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban to fire her. The organisers called it, “Public Outrage Day”.

Earlier in the day, around 2,000 metal workers held a demonstration in front of parliament. They were protesting government plans to raise the tax on cafeteria benefits. The benefit voucher system was introduced in the 1990s and is popular with workers who rely on them to subsidize their low wages.

Polish miners stage occupation

Around 200 Polish miners have been occupying the headquarters of the Polish state-owned mining company, Kompania Weglowa SA, the largest coal producer in the European Union, since November 13. They are protesting plans to liquidate the firm, threatening the jobs of over 46,000 employees.

Those taking part in the occupation include members of the IndustriaALL Global Union affiliates KADRA and Solidarnosc. They are demanding the Polish government intervene to save the company. The company has already shed more than 10,000 jobs over the last two years and, prior to the threat to liquidate the company, was the subject of a restructuring plan to cut 26,000 jobs.

Serbian teachers’ action to oppose pay cuts

Serbian teachers, belonging to four unions in Serbia, took part in industrial action Monday in protest over a 10 percent pay cut brought in for all public-sector workers including teachers. The cuts came into effect on November 1.

The teachers reduced class teaching times from the normal 45 minutes to 30 minutes. They are also seeking the maintenance of the current situation whereby schools are not allowed to offer teaching posts at schools with staff facing redundancy.

Latvian teachers announce action

Latvian teachers have announced they will be prepared to strike in support of a 10 percent pay increase. Initially the teachers will take part in local partial strike action but will call an all-out nationwide strike if government turns down its demands.

The teachers union was due to meet Wednesday of this week to decide on dates for its proposed action.

Strike by Cypriot doctors

Cypriot state doctors belonging to the PASYKI union held a two-hour strike between 7:30 and 9:30 a.m. on Monday. They issued four key demands: money for overtime pay, freeing up posts for promotion, improvement of their contracts under the new health scheme (NHS) and more time to discuss their employment conditions under the NHS.

PASYKI head, Maro Kontou, told the press that doctors had been given too little time to discuss the implications for their future under the NHS. She stated: “Our future is on the line and the ministry does not want to inform us. The bills will be tabled by the end of the week. He wants us to decide on the bill within one or two days. ... In six months GPs will enter the NHS and they don’t know their employment conditions.”

Middle East

Gaza civil servants in one-day strike

Civil servants in Gaza held a one-day strike Tuesday, demanding

official recognition as part of the recently-formed Palestinian unity government.

Around 45,000 civil servants who had been appointed by the former Hamas government, stopped receiving their wages when the unity government was created in June of this year.

Egyptian union federation denounces arrest of union leader

The Regional Federation of Delta Trade Unions condemned the arrest on Sunday of Mahmoud Rehan, Vice President of the Worker's Independent Syndicate at Cairo airport on Sunday.

The federation says it is part of an organised campaign against the leadership of the Syndicate. They claim Rehan is being targeted because he was opposing corruption within the company he works for and for unveiling corrupt managers.

Iraqi trade unions demand back pay

On Monday, the General Federation of Iraq Trade Unions (GIFTU) said the government should pay in full, back-pay owed to several groups of workers. They were responding to the government's announcement that it would pay around 40 percent of the outstanding back-pay.

Among those owed back-pay are textile workers in Babylon, cooking-oil workers in Missan and clothing company employees in Najaf. Many have not been paid since August. Several rallies have been held over the last few weeks by employees demanding the wages owed to them.

Israeli union federation announces strike intention over minimum wage

The chairman of the General Federation of Labour, Histadrut, Avi Nissenkorn, has given the required two weeks' notice of general strike action to demand an increase in the minimum wage.

The current minimum gives a wage of NIS 4,300 (\$1,120) a month. The demand is for this to be raised to NIS 5,300 (\$1,380) a month or NIS 30 (\$8) an hour. Histadrut has come under pressure from organisations such as the Democratic Workers' Organisation to push for a rise in the minimum wage.

If it goes ahead, the strike would begin on December 2, with the action including public-sector workers, the Israeli Aviation Authority, Israeli Railways and municipal authorities throughout the country. Teachers are also expected to join the action. Public hospital staff will not strike but would take part in go-slow action in support.

According to Nissenkorn, around a quarter of Israeli employees, 700,000, are on low pay and not able to "make ends meet".

Africa

Strike of Nigerian health workers continues

The Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU) are continuing their strike at

Nigerian federal hospitals, which began on November 13. The coalition of health unions demanded their conditions be met before they return to work.

The strike has paralysed federal hospitals in the Nigerian capital Lagos, as 99 percent of patients have been evacuated and the hospitals are expected to be emptied.

The state and local hospitals are expected to support the strike in the coming week. The immediate issue is over the implementation of salary increases which should have been upgraded in January. Last week, the JOHESU spokesperson said no circular has been issued, let alone increases paid, and the new November budget has not included for it, although the Nigerian Medical Association members are receiving their increase.

Ghanaian starch workers demand wage rise

Workers went on strike at the Ayensu Starch Factory in Ghana's Central Region demanding an increase in their wages. The employees informed management on November 13 that if an increase was not forthcoming, they would take strike action until their demands are met.

A spokesperson for the strikers said that their income was meagre and not sufficient under the current economic circumstances in Ghana.

Ghanaian oil workers fight for reinstatement

Striking oil workers at MODEC, an oil processor company situated off the coast of Ghana, remain sacked while their union negotiates with the Ministry of Labour over reinstatement.

Local unions were due to hold a 24-hour strike in their support, which was expected to cripple the petroleum sector. Workers in other parts of the oil sector have already come out in solidarity at Tema Oil Refinery and Bulk Oil Storage and Transportation Co. Ltd.

Twenty-seven MODEC workers came out on strike, demanding an end to discrimination in pay and conditions, and the remaining 12 workers later followed suit. When the 12 refused to sign a good-conduct commitment and return to work, they were immediately sacked.

Sugar workers in Mauritius take action

Mauritian sugar plant workers have gone on strike following the Mauritian Sugar Producers Association's (MSPA) refusal to increase pay by 30 percent.

The minister of labour has proposed a 13 percent increase to the Joint Negotiating Panel (JNP), a union-management negotiating body. The union has reduced its demand from 40 percent. The MSPA is offering 11 percent, two percent less than the government's proposal.

Mozambique tobacco workers protest

Workers at the Mozambique Leaf Tobacco factory rioted and went on

strike over fraudulently paid wages. Police fired on the 500 rioting workers on November 14, injuring one.

The protest came after tobacco workers discovered the company had been paying them only half their wages. A worker found out that the basic wage at the Mozambique Leaf Tobacco was paid at 6,500 meticaïs (US \$106) per month, whereas the company had been paying around half the amount.

Kenyan nurses set to strike

Members of the Kenyan National Union of Nurses are planning to take industrial action on November 24 to demand the government sign a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). The terms of the CBA were agreed in February, and were the result of negotiations begun September last year.

The agreement was to improve working conditions, and as part of the Economic Stimulus Program, all workers were to be brought onto the permanent and pensionable scheme.

The industrial action had already been put off for 60 days since September. The union's national secretary said their action will paralyse all services in public hospitals across the country if the government does not sign up to the CBA by November 24.



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