

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

28 November 2014

## Belgian workers launch strike programme against austerity

Belgian workers have begun a month-long series of intermittent strikes against the austerity measures of the Prime Minister Charles Michel-led rightwing coalition government.

Union members belonging to the three largest Belgian trade unions held province-wide strikes Monday in four of Luxembourg's 10 provinces, Hainaut, Luxembourg, Limburg and Antwerp. They will hold province-wide strikes in East and West Flanders, Namur and Liege Monday December 1 and in Flemish and Walloon Brabant and Brussels on Monday December 8.

As part of the month-long series of strikes, the ASTB rail union is due to hold its first nation-wide strike December 11. Airport staff at Belgium's main airport, Zaventem, near Brussels are due to strike twice next month, firstly on December 8 as part of a regional-wide 24 hour strike and again on December 15, which is scheduled as a general strike.

Workers in airports, buses, trams, subways, mainline trains and schools struck under the banners of the two main trade unions, the FGVB and the CSC unions, whose members were wearing respectively red and green colours. The FGVB is the Federation Generale des Travailleurs Belges or General Confederations of Belgian Workers. The CSC is the Confederation des Syndicats Chretiens, or Confederations of Christian Trade Unions.

Workers blocked roads and roundabouts to prevent access to airports, harbours and public sector buildings such as schools and colleges. Half of all teachers were on strike in Antwerp. The airport of Charleroi was paralysed by the strike. The port of Antwerp was closed and ships had to wait offshore to disembark their cargo on the port reopening the next day.

Since September 2014 with the coming to power of the coalition of the New Flemish Alliance (NVA) and Reformist Movement (MR), a savage austerity programme has been rolled out by Prime Minister Michel, nicknamed Michel I for his arrogance towards the working class.

FGVB leader Marc Goblet said of the strikes, "We are fighting on everyone's behalf." But the FGVB and the CSC have mounted a series of rolling strikes in order to divide workers into provincial areas and avoid a series of one-day general strikes nationwide. This is to better allow the trade unions to continue co-managing the cuts alongside the government and employers.

CSC leader Marie-Helene Ska revealingly stated on Belgian TV, "The message towards the bosses is very clear: please listen to us and do not wall yourselves in your stubbornness with the government agreement on implementing austerity; accept having a discussion with us; there is nothing shameful in discussing these measures which are perfectly unjust."

## UK health care workers in four-hour walkout

Health workers in England and Northern Ireland staged a second four-hour strike from 7 am to 11 am on Monday. It was to protest the failure of the government to implement a proposal by the independent Pay Body Review of a one percent across the board pay increase for all health staff. The government proposed that only staff at the top of their pay grade, and so not entitled to an annual incremental pay rise, be given the one percent non-consolidated rise.

Those on strike included nurses, ambulance staff and midwives. In all ten unions took part in the action (see: British health unions carrying out fraudulent "fair pay fight").

The limited four-hour action was followed by a week of work to rule, in a similar manner to the strike held last month. While the demand was for the government to give health staff an across the board one percent pay increase, the 1.3 million workers in the NHS have seen their real pay cut by 10 to 15 percent since 2010 following four years of government imposed pay freezes.

## Further one-day general strike in Greece

Greece's public and private sector unions, GSEE and ADEDY, held a 24-hour general strike on Thursday.

The action virtually closed down Greece, with airplanes and public transport, including ferries, grounded. Schools and offices were closed while hospitals were reduced to emergency staff only. The strike was preceded by a 24-hour walkout by media workers.

It is the 32nd one-day strike called by the main unions since 2010 against the ongoing European Union and International Monetary Fund-imposed austerity measures.

[subhead]Georgian railway strike

Rail staff in the Georgian Railway Workers' New Trade Union (GRWNTU) came out on strike Wednesday, vowing not to return until their demands have been met.

Their main demands are for a proposed wage cut to be dropped and a "new fair salary system" as agreed on a year ago be implemented, the restoration of the system of a 13th pay cheque, comprising a full month's pay, as a bonus each year, and payment for overtime as laid down in labour law.

Georgian railways are reported to have made record profits this year.

## Italian metal workers march against job "reforms" in Naples

Members of the Italian Federation of Metalworkers (FIOM) marched through Naples last Friday, as part of the ongoing opposition against

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's labour "reforms".

The proposed changes in labour law would make it easier for employers to sack workers and increase job insecurity.

### **Scandinavian airline dismisses Swedish cabin crew**

Last week the Scandinavian airline SAS sent out 100 dismissals notices to Swedish air cabin crew. The cabin crews' union is in dispute with SAS over the smaller rest areas available in the new airplane models it has introduced to its service.

SAS plans to replace the dismissed staff with Norwegian cabin crew, saying that their union agreement allows for the smaller rest space in the new model of airliner.

### **Spanish rail workers announce strike dates**

The CGT union has announced strikes against the rail companies, RENFE and ADIF. They are due to take place December 6 and 8, which are bank holidays in Spain, and have been called to protest the government's decision to allow private carriers to enter the market.

CGT is demanding the government put more investment into basic rail infrastructure, not just the high-speed lines. They are calling for an end to the wage freeze imposed by the two companies, the recruitment of additional staff, earlier retirement and for the payment of their 2012 Christmas bonus. Both companies put money aside for the bonus but failed to pay it out.

### **Egyptian steel workers strike**

Employees of the Egyptian Iron and Steel Company (EISCO) in southern Cairo went on strike last Saturday. It is one of the largest factories in the country. By Sunday over 11,000 workers had downed tools, bringing production to a standstill.

Among their demands was for 15 months worth of annual profit shares, the payment of four bonuses that had been due this year, the reinstatement of workers sacked in previous strikes and the dismissal of the board of directors.

### **Iranian workers rally against employment law**

Thousands of workers took part in a rally in Tehran Thursday, last week, to protest government proposals to change employment law that will undermine employees' job security and legal protest protection.

They are members of the Tehran Manufacturing and Service Workers union. They called on the labour minister, Ali Rabii, to support their demands.

### **Strike of Iranian tile workers enters second month**

Over 160 employees of the Gilana Tile factory in the city of Manjil have been on strike since the middle of September. They are demanding back wages owed since 2009, as well as the fact that 70 retired former employees have not received pensions due to them.

Eight have been arrested by police and 22 have been dismissed from their posts in the course of the dispute. Their reinstatement has been added to the list of demands.

### **Ghanaian public sector workers in pension dispute**

Ghanaian public sector workers demonstrated in Accra on November 20, demanding the government hand over members' pension funds and for the unions to determine who administers the fund.

Twelve unions, including the Civil and Local Government Staff Association of Ghana, Teachers and Educational Workers Union (TEWU), Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), the National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT), the Coalition of Concerned Teachers (CCT) and the Health Service Workers Union (HSWU) took part in the demonstration. They had previously taken strike action, but the government was able to impose a temporary injunction on a further strike.

The issue of the legality of the strike goes to court on December 16. The attorney general claims that the government has the sole right to administer the second tier pension scheme and that the unions must call off their strike. The government has made claims against the unions for loss of revenues.

### **Action by Nigerian food and drug staff ends**

Workers at the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration Control offices (NAFDAC) called off a strike November 27 that was entering its third week. The Medical and Health Workers Union (MHWU) had declared it would not return to work until its demands were met.

The workers are demanding implementation of the Consolidated Health Salary Structure CONHESS agreed in 2009 and payment of a productivity allowance known as 13th month salary at the end of the year. MHWU are also demanding payment of promotional arrears outstanding for 2012 and 2013, as well as several other unmet claims. Offices of the NAFDAC in 36 states have closed as well as those at airports and seaports.

According to reports, a three-man committee set up by the federal government will look into the salary issue.

### **Strike by Ebola staff in Sierra Leone**

Burial team workers went on strike in the eastern Sierra Leone town of Kenema, leaving Ebola victims' bodies outside the hospital. The action is in response to the government's failure to pay promised hazard allowance payments over the last seven weeks. Health workers had previously gone on strike over the same issue.

Management accepted that the workers had not been paid, but said they would be sacked for the action they had taken. Up till November 21, 588 health care workers have been infected and 337 have died in the three main countries affected by the Ebola crisis - Liberia, Sierra Leone and

Guinea.

### **South African postal workers return to work**

South African postal workers went back to work Monday, following a settlement, which gave them a 6.5 percent wage increase and the transition of casual workers into full employment in two years. The pay offer is a modest increase on the five percent proposed by the Post Office at the beginning of the strike a year ago. The original union demand had been for 10 percent.

The Communications Workers Union (CWU), which represents about 60 percent of staff at the parastatal, said it was not happy with the settlement. The CWU said the other two unions had agreed the Post Office's terms and management had threatened to sack the rest of the workers if they did not return to work.

The government withdrew a subsidy provided to the Post Office last year, while top management increased their wages by 25 percent in the same period. The Post Office expects the four-month delivery backlog to be cleared in three weeks, just as the busy Christmas period opens up.

### **Malawi food workers strike**

Civil servants employed at the National Food Reserve Agency struck in response to the imposition of a 10 percent pay increase. Workers are carrying out a sit-in at the Kanengo Silos Complex in Lilongwe, demanding a 45 percent pay increase and the removal of the Human Resource Manager who imposed the pay increase.



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