

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

5 December 2014

Europe

Regional general strike in Belgium

A regional general strike took place in Belgium on Monday, affecting eastern and western parts of the country. The action hit train and bus services and also local government administration.

The strike was part of a programme of action against the austerity measures of the right-wing coalition government, led by Prime Minister Charles Michel. Further regional action is planned for next week, culminating in a nationwide general strike on Monday, December 15.

Walkout at French oil refinery

More than 100 employees at the Total oil company Gonfreville refinery in the Normandy area of France began a three-day strike on Monday. They are protesting the company's plan to close one lubricant production unit, producing low-grade lubricant, at the refinery that would affect 50 jobs. New European environmental legislation bans the use of low-grade lubricants within Europe.

Dispute by Georgian rail workers ends

The strike of rail workers in Georgia that began last week ended Wednesday after the union and employer representatives reached a partial agreement. The workers are members of the Georgian Railway Workers' New Trade Union (GRWNTU) and are demanding that proposals to cut wages are dropped, that a "new fair salary system" based on experience and agreed on last year be implemented, and the the annual "bonus" 13th pay cheque system be restored and overtime be paid.

The deal reportedly only met part of the strikers' demands, including payment of a New Year's bonus of up to one half their regular salaries.

Strike by Irish teachers to oppose exam reform

Secondary teachers in Ireland in the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) and the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) held a one-

day strike on Tuesday. They were protesting proposed government reform of the Junior Cert exam, which would end external assessment of the qualification, among other measures.

The action resulted in more than 350,000 students missing school. The TUI and ASTI unions have said there could be further strikes in the new year if talks with the government fail.

Lithuanian teachers strike

Lithuanian teachers, members of the Lithuanian Education Employees Trade Union (LSDPS), began an indefinite strike on Tuesday. The strike affects around 120 schools approximately a tenth of all schools in the country.

Among teacher's demands is a salary increase to €370 (US\$455) a month. They currently receive €350 (US\$430) a month. They also want the retirement age reduced to 55.

Protest by Dutch rail workers

Around 150 trains drivers and conductors working for Netherland Trains (NS) failed to report for work Tuesday morning at The Hague.

Their action led to the cancellation of some services. They were taking part in a meeting with management to raise their concerns about the pressure of work resulting from lack of time between jobs.

London bus drivers and energy workers balloted

Around 20,000 bus drivers in the UK capital London are being balloted by their union UNITE. They are voting over proposed action against pay disparities across the 18 bus operators within the London area. They are seeking a London-wide agreement to cover pay, terms and conditions.

Separately, UNITE is balloting its more than 500 members employed by the French-owned Energy company EDF. The ballot is over the refusal of the company to reinstate a driver sacked after allegedly eating while at the wheel and also over the company's 2 percent pay offer. The ballot runs till December 17.

Turkish company sacks nearly 3,000 miners

The company running mines in the Turkish town of Soma, including the mine where 301 miners were killed in May of this year, has sacked almost 3,000 miners at all three pits. The three mines were closed following the tragedy, but one subsequently reopened. The company is now saying it cannot afford to pay the miners on its books at the two closed mines and is closing down its whole operation.

The head of the miners' union has called on the Turkish state-run Turkish Coal Enterprises (TKI) to take over the running of the mines and safeguard the jobs.

Middle East

Nationwide strike in Israel called off

The first nationwide strike in nearly three years was due to begin in Israel this coming Sunday.

However, trade union federation Histadrut called off the action and accepted the government's offer of an increase in the minimum wage from its current monthly level of 4,300 shekels (US\$1,080) to 5,000 shekels (US\$1,260). The union had previously demanded 5,300 shekels (US\$1,355).

The raise will take place in three stages, with the first increase set to take effect January 1, 2015.

Israeli harassment of undocumented Palestinian workers

On Monday, Israeli forces fired on Palestinian workers trying to cross into Israel near the Jubara checkpoint without work permits. They were attempting to climb the border fence. When they did not respond to orders to stop, the troops opened fire. There was no report of injuries, but the men were detained for questioning before being turned back.

In East Jerusalem, Israeli forces pulled over a van that failed to obey orders from border guards to voluntarily stop. The van was transporting 13 undocumented Palestinian workers seeking employment in Israel. They were detained along with the driver.

According to the Israeli rights group B'Tselem, there are around 15,000 to 30,000 undocumented Palestinian workers within the country.

Africa

Strike by oil workers in Gabon

Oil workers in Gabon went on strike to demand the reinstatement of their sacked workmates, among other demands, on Monday. The workers are organised by the umbrella union ONEP, which has called on its 5,000-plus members across the country to down tools. The Gabon oil industry produces 230,000 barrels of oil per day for major companies including Total, Royal Dutch Shell and Sinopec's Gabon operation, Addax.

The action has affected the production, distribution and services of the industry to the extent it has caused panic buying at the forecourts.

The strikers say they would only return to work when government, negotiating on behalf of the oil industry, met four of its demands. The demands include the immediate suspension of some salary deductions, the lifting of sanctions by oil firms Perenco and STSI Bocard on some

workers and that STSI Bocard manager and Libyan Oil Gabon director general be expelled from the country.

Action by Ghanaian construction workers

Construction workers repairing the Adomi Bridge, Asuogyaman District in the Eastern Region of Ghana, went on strike at the end of November. The 59 welders, fabricators and labourers are demanding a pay increase.

A representative said they feel cheated, as they have been working on the bridge for nine months for very poor pay. Management had brought negotiations to an end as there was no bargaining certificate. The bridge connects the Eastern and Volta regions of the country.

Swazi miners fight for housing allowances

Swaziland miners went on strike at the Maloma colliery demanding housing allowance payments ranging from E425 (US\$42) to E800 (US\$80). South Africa's African National Congress owns a 75 percent share in the mine, with the remaining 25 percent owned by the 1 billion rand Tibiyo Taka Ngwane trust, which is effectively controlled by Swaziland's King Mswati III.

The striking miners were refused access to toilets, water and medical facilities and surrounded by armed police. The king has a stake in every major business in Swaziland and has effectively proscribed the newly formed Trade Union Congress.

Nigerian medics protest unpaid wages

Doctors affiliated to the Nigerian Medical Association demonstrated at state hospitals over the refusal of the government to reimburse three months of unpaid salaries. The Lagos administration denies owing the doctors any outstanding payments, saying they were referring to unpaid wages while on strike.

The doctors claim a form of apartheid is being implemented and that other state workers get paid while on strike, while they are penalised under a "no work, no pay" decision. The protesting doctors in the Medical Guild said the government has no concern for health, citing that one hospital had been in darkness for six weeks because the generator had broken down.



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