

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

19 December 2014

Europe

Belgian 24-hour general strike

Belgian trade union organisations held a one-day general strike Monday. The first general strike since 1993 follows a series of one-day regional strikes. The action is in opposition to plans by the centre-right government of Charles Michel to cut public spending by €11 billion (US\$13.6 billion) over the next five years. Measures include scrapping the automatic indexing of salaries and raising the retirement pension age from 65 to 67.

The action led to the closure of Belgian airspace, the cancellation of all trains including the Eurostar service to London and closing the majority of schools. Police attacked workers with water cannon to break up a protest outside the offices of one of the government coalition parties, the Flemish-separatist N-VA.

Further action planned in Italy against Jobs Act

Italian trade unions have pledged further action against Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi's "reforms" to the labour market, making it easier to sack workers, following last Friday's eight-hour general strike. However, they have not said what that action would be.

The general strike was organised by two of the three largest trade union bodies, the CGIL and UIL. The second-largest union, the CISL, did not take part.

No trust can be placed in any of the union bodies to lead a sustained fight. The *World Socialist Web Site* explained in its report on the general strike, "In October, government leaders met with representatives of all three major unions (CGIL, CISL and UIL) and at the end of their talks spoke of 'surprising points of mutual understanding'."

The CISL made clear its pro-capitalist credentials. In an interview explaining why her union did not take part in the general strike, union leader Annamaria Furlan said, "A general strike is not the right tool for a country which has lost 25 percentage points of industrial production."

Further strikes hit German wing of Amazon

More than 2,000 staff working for Amazon in Germany walked out of five of the company's distribution centres on Monday beginning a five-day strike. They were joined by Amazon workers at a sixth site on

Tuesday. They are members of the Verdi union.

Their action is to further a long-running demand that Amazon workers be paid in line with rates for retail and mail order staff. Amazon classes its staff as logistics workers so that they receive a lower rate.

UK: Walkout by lecturers in London

Members of the University and College Union (UCU) employed at Lambeth college in South London began a three-day strike Wednesday. The strike is part of an ongoing dispute over changes to contracts and plans to introduce detrimental contracts for new staff.

The lecturers voted by an 83 percent majority earlier in the year to carry out the industrial action, now the longest running such action in the union's history. The three-day strike this week brings the total days of strike action this month to six. The UCU is planning an indefinite strike from January 19.

UK union anxious to avoid strike of airport staff

Baggage and cargo handling staff working for the dnata company have voted by an 83 percent majority to begin a two-day strike December 23. The 460 staff are employed at Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester airports, with the majority employed at Heathrow. The proposed action is in response to a divisive pay offer, which would give supervisors a 4.5 percent pay rise but other staff only a 2.25 rise.

The employees are members of the union UNITE, which is anxious to avoid the strike and is calling on the company to agree to the intervention of the government body, the ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) conciliation service. In a statement, UNITE said, "Strike action is very much a last resort and our members...feel frustrated with an employer that has refused point blank to go to ACAS and negotiate in a sensible manner."

Bulgarian protests against plans to raise pension age

The Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria organised a protest march through the capital city of Sofia last Thursday. It was to oppose the plans of the newly elected minority government of Prime Minister Boiko Borisov to raise the retirement age for manual workers by four months, which would mean men could not retire until they reached

64, and women 61.

Workers from across the country carried banners saying, “We don’t want to work until the end of our days.”

Bulgaria’s average retirement pension of around €160 (US\$198) is one of the lowest in the European Union.

Protest by Hungarian tobacco workers

Tobacco workers organised by the Hungarian League of Trade Unions organised a protest in Budapest on Monday. It was to oppose government plans to set up a national tobacco distributor, which workers fear will lead to the loss of 1,600 jobs in the private sector.

The protest, which attracted countrywide support, consisted of setting up roadblocks to disrupt traffic. Protesters demonstrated in Kossuth Square in front of the parliament building. Some handed out bars of chocolate with pictures of their families on them. Text on the chocolate bars included the wording: “What I would like for Christmas is for my parents not to lose their workplace.”

Irish airport staff reject pension proposals

Members of the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) at Dublin and Shannon airport authorities voted to reject management proposals to resolve the large deficit in the Irish Airlines Superannuation Scheme, which finances their pensions. Workers at the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA) voted by 90 percent to reject the proposals.

A Labour Court ruling in 2013 proposed that the DAA and other companies involved in the scheme only pay 25 percent of the shortfall. This would have left employees having to make up the majority of the shortfall through higher contributions and lower pensions.

Portuguese unions in talks to avert airline walkout

Talks took place Monday to try to avert a planned strike by 12 unions representing staff at the National Portuguese airline TAP. The action is due to take place over four days from December 27 to December 30.

The proposed strike is to oppose government plans to privatise TAP airlines and against poor working conditions. At the time of going to press, it was not known whether or not the strike would go ahead.

Condemnation of arrest of Turkish journalists

The Journalists Union of Turkey (TGS) backed by the International Federation of Journalists and the European Federation of Journalists has condemned the arrest of 23 journalists and media executives at the mass circulation *Zaman* newspaper and the *Samanyolu* television broadcasting service. They were arrested on Sunday in raids by police. The raided media facilities are supporters of the US-based Muslim cleric, Fethullah Gulen.

Once an ally of Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan, Gullen’s media outlets are alleging corruption in the Erdogan government.

Middle East

Iranian miners strike over unpaid wages

More than 260 miners at the Kooshk mine near the city of Bafgh have returned to work after being on strike last week, protesting poor conditions and three months’ unpaid wages.

After making threats to get the miners to return, the government backed down and promised the miners would receive their pay arrears in full by Wednesday of this week. Workers threatened to go on indefinite strike if the promise was broken.

Labour disputes declared in Israel

The Histadrut union federation announced several labour disputes at the end of last week, opening up the prospect of potential industrial action. One dispute declared was at Haifa port, where more than 1,000 port workers are opposing management plans to outsource contracts.

Over 2,500 rail workers are in dispute over Israeli Railways’ plans to introduce contract workers into its ticket offices.

A dispute has also been declared at Israeli Military Industries, Ltd. (IMI). IMI staff are opposed to the company’s scheme to outsource work and push through a reorganisation programme that contravenes a current collective work agreement.

Protest by Tunisian construction workers

Last week, Tunisian construction workers staged a sit-down protest outside the Bardo Palace. They were protesting non-payment of wages. A delegation met with the speaker of the House of People’s Representatives to push their demands.

Africa

Kenyan municipal workers struggle over unpaid allowances

Six hundred Kenyan workers from all over Nyeri County demonstrated outside the governor’s office Tuesday, protesting over three months of unpaid wages for around 200 casuals and the continuation of casual status. The casual workers are claiming Ksh.53 million (US\$585,000) owed to them and have been out on strike since December 12, alongside their employed counterparts.

The workers are out on strike over unpaid holiday/days-off going back to 1999. Casual workers have no entitlement to paid holiday/days-off—meaning some have had no day-off for 15 years.

Namibian beverage workers protest

Workers at Namibian Beverages, which produces and bottles Coca-Cola and other internationally known brands, demonstrated December 11 against unequal treatment. The workers threatened to strike if the complaints were not dealt with and protested outside the company in the industrial zone of the capital, Windhoek.

The workers demanded the details of the pay structure be made transparent to the whole workforce so inequality can be seen. They demanded an investigation into management and the methods employed in the Affirmative Action Committee (AAC), which is supposed to bring about equal opportunity.

They demanded that the 2014 Affirmative Action Report be rejected and withdrawn and that shop stewards who had been suspended be reinstated.

Other demands were for the implementation of the 2013 Affirmative Action Report wage and benefits agreement as soon as possible, along with the ending of what is described as racial discrimination on the AAC.



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Namibian court order against road workers

The Namibian high court has imposed an injunction on a strike by workers employed by the government-owned Road Contractor Company (RCC). An urgent application to courts was sought after the Public Servants Union of Namibia (PSUN) put in a notice of strike action on December 9.

The union claims that previous disputes going back to 2013 have not been settled and are still in dispute, while management claims there is no outstanding settlement and a new mandate for strike action has not been applied for, making the strike illegal.

The new demands for wage and other increases, according to the presiding judge, should have been put to the company before September 30 in the 2014-2015 bargaining round. The judge is noted for his association with RCC and has received free accommodation and vehicle provision from the company in the past. He set a date for the union to provide the court with good reason for calling a strike, up to and before March 5 of next year; otherwise the interdict will be made final.

Nigerian oil workers stage warning strike

Nigerian oil workers began a three-day warning strike Monday to demand the reinstatement of union officials and the adoption of the delayed Petroleum Industry Bill. They also want a reduction of petrol forecourt costs, in line with world production prices.

The two unions involved are the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) and Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG). They accuse the government of allowing the oil refineries to fall into disrepair and state that the poor condition of road infrastructure has become an impediment to oil transportation. An oil industries spokesperson suggested there would be little impact on production.

The two unions have a record of calling strikes only to quickly call them off. A strike called by the unions in September that was soon abandoned had little impact, only reducing exports by around 3 percent.

Nigeria produced more than 25 percent of Africa's crude oil, 2.3 million barrels a day last year. Royal Dutch Shell Plc, Exxon Mobil Corp., Chevron Corp., Total SA and Eni SpA operate joint ventures with the state-owned NNPC.