

# Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

9 January 2015

## Europe

### Clothing workers strike in Gateshead, England

Staff working for the Barbour clothing company began a four-week strike on Monday. They work at Barbour's warehouse in Wardley, Gateshead in northeast England. The company employs 160 at the warehouse. Over a third are members of the Unite trade union, which called the strike. The action follows six days of strike in December.

The dispute began when the company announced it was going to bring in changes to working hours and cut extra payments for unsocial hours. Many have worked there for more than 20 years. They say the new working hours, with early starts and late finishes, would make it difficult to get to the isolated worksite using public transport. Unite regional officer Fazia Hussain-Brown told the BBC, "Many of the workers struggling to get by on less than the living wage are the sole bread winner and have family or caring responsibilities."

Last year Barbour made £18 million in profits.

### Northern Irish call centre staff suspended

More than 130 call centre staff working for Firstsource in the Irish city of Derry have been suspended. Firstsource, headquartered in India, provides banking and financial services to business. Globally, it employs over 30,000, of which 2,000 work in its call centres in Derry and Belfast in Northern Ireland.

Some of those suspended only found out from colleagues or when they saw the word suspended written against their names on the work rota.

A company spokesman told the press, "A number of policies and procedures may have been breached by members of staff."

It is believed the dispute arose over the selling of Sky broadcasting packages.

The workers believe they are being scapegoated by the company over problems arising with the Sky promotion procedure. One suspended worker told the press, "Morale has been the lowest I've ever seen in a workplace. There is a constant pressure of having to do things you're not happy with. They add different procedures and policies, making it difficult for people to achieve their monthly bonuses. Workers are finding it difficult to manage their day-to-day work."

### Protest by sacked Turkish security staff

On New Year's Eve, the municipal authority running the southwestern city of Antalya effectively sacked 200 security staff contracted to the authority. The authority changed the contract with the company supplying the security staff.

The sacked employees together with members of their families staged a protest Monday outside Antalya city hall, demanding the mayor explain the decision to change the contract. Huseyin Calkaya, a representative of the security guards union, called on the Antalya authority to pay the sacked staff severance pay.

Although employed on temporary contracts, many of the 200 workers had worked for the authority nine years or more before suddenly being sacked.

### New Year sacking for Bulgarian power workers

More than 220 employees of power company TPP at its thermal power plant in the Bulgarian city of Varna were sacked over the course of the first week of 2015. The workforce numbers dwindled throughout the week, as the power station was shut down.

Owners CEZ Bulgaria shut down the plant claiming that it does not meet European ecological standards.

Hristo Hristov, the chairperson of the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria at the TPP plant spoke to Radio Focus. He expressed a concern that closure of the plant represented a threat to power supplies in the region, but there was no mention of opposition to the closure and job losses.

### Macedonian contract workers protest new tax laws

Actors, journalists, musicians, NGO employees and others employed as contract workers held a march through the Macedonian capital Skopje on December 22.

They were protesting tax changes which came in at the beginning of the New Year, whereby employees on fixed-term contracts or employed on a casual basis will have to pay 35 percent of their earnings to cover health and social welfare as if they were full-time employees.

Protesters on the march shouted chants including "No to the state racket" and "Government thieves." It is estimated that the extra tax will hit around 10 percent of the population employed on a contract or casual basis who only earn 200 to 400 euros (\$240-\$470) a month. They were also protesting the discriminatory basis of the tax, which excludes certain higher paid government employees.



## **5,000 state firm jobs to be lost in Serbia**

It is estimated around 5,000 jobs will be eliminated in the course of this year as the Serbian government bankrupts nearly 190 state enterprises. The plan is in line with the terms of a one billion euro loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the Serbian government “restructures” the economy. The cuts are part of the conditions required for Serbia to be considered for membership of the European Union. The IMF loan is conditional on the elimination of 27,000 public-sector jobs.

### **Middle East**

## **Protest of Iranian bus drivers**

Around 400 drivers for the United Bus Company of Tehran held a protest in the city on Tuesday.

They were opposing the company’s failure to honour promises first made 10 years ago to pay its staff housing allowances to enable them to buy homes in the city. Most of the drivers have not yet received the allowance.

## **Iranian Pars Wagon staff end two-week strike**

Around 900 employees of the Pars Wagon Company in the northwest city of Arak returned to work on Monday following a two-week strike. Pars Wagon manufactures railway rolling stock.

They began the strike when the company refused to renew the contract of Ali Derakhshandeh Bakht who acted as a representative of the workforce. The return to work was pending talks on Bakht’s reinstatement.

## **Gaza hospital workers strike**

Hospital workers in the Gaza strip held a one-day strike Sunday protesting non-payment of their salaries for more than seven months. The staff were originally employed by the Hamas government when it came to power in 2007.

The new unity government formed in June last year has so far failed to assume its responsibility for the wage bill.

## **Israeli labour court orders pilots to stop sanctions**

On Monday, an Israeli labour court extended an order restraining El Al airline pilots from action resulting in the airline being unable to fly scheduled flights.

On Sunday, El Al airline pilots failed to make themselves available, which led to the delay of four scheduled flights. The pilots deny they are taking part in any industrial action. Nir Tzuk, a pilot and chairman of the El Al Pilot Association, said there is a “severe, genuine and alarming shortage of pilots, especially first officers, for several months... We are

flying an average of 30 percent more flights than last year.”

### **Africa**

## **Namibian retail workers face court action**

Namibian workers employed by the Shoprite supermarket firm are being taken to court by their employers for taking strike action not sanctioned by their union.

The strike took place on December 19 in the areas of Katutura, Academia, Maerua Mall and Independence Avenue. The Namibia Commercial Catering Food and Allied Workers Union confirmed that the strikers would be summoned to court on January 28.

The shop workers embarked on the strike against the union’s advice because they thought it unfair to be working for as little as N\$400 (\$34) a month. Some workers received between N\$800 and N\$1000 (\$69-\$86) in back pay and a 20 percent wage increase as a result of the strike.

## **South African bus drivers walk out over unpaid wages and bonuses**

Transnat’s 700 bus drivers struck on January 1 over wages and bonuses that should have been paid into their bank accounts on December 31.

The Durban municipality (known as eThekweni in Zulu) holds responsibility for Transnet bus service covering the second largest city in South Africa with a population of 3.5 million. Two years ago the Transnat Company was given the contract to run the bus service for eThekweni. The nephew of Jacob Zuma is an executive on the Transnat board.

A member of the drivers’ union, the Transport and Allied Workers Union said, “We are sick and tired of working without being paid. Transnat is getting millions from eThekweni municipality for running this service but every month we are not getting paid on time. We have bills to pay and debit orders to pay and once our salaries are not paid on time, we suffer penalties.”

Workers say they will not return to work until the municipality retakes the buses under its control.

## **Death of Zambian miner leads to strike**

Some 3,000 Zambian miners went on strike Monday at the Kalumbila mine in response to the death of 25-year-old Greyen Taimos. Taimos died in a mining accident. Workers are also protesting the company’s refusal to pay a funeral grant.

The miners accuse the company of lack of medical treatment at its hospital where Taimo died, even though miners pay K750 (\$114) into the medical scheme. The only alternative to the mine hospital is in Solwezi, 140km away.

The miners are demanding an increase in wages and better working conditions at a mine officially considered to be “first class”. The mine, owned by Canada’s First Quantum, is one of the largest in the world.

## **Nationwide strike of Kenyan teachers**



Kenyan teachers began a nationwide strike Monday, demanding an increase in basic wages.

The Kenyan National Union of Teachers (KNUT) walked out of a meeting with government representatives offering only increases in allowances. The union chairman said they would continue the strike until the government tables a counter-offer on basic salary.

Teachers are putting forward a list of 38 demands including a 300 percent wage increase. Schools remained open in the private sector, although KNUT says the public sector will bring the teachers out in the private schools. The government has declared the strike illegal and is employing the Teachers Service Commission to monitor those absent from their post. The government is cutting teachers' pay as part of its programme to reduce the public-sector wages bill.

### **Strike of Nigerian judicial workers**

Judicial workers in Nigeria held a further strike Monday, demanding the independence of the judiciary. A court ruling last year implementing judicial financial autonomy has been consistently ignored, resulting in indefinite strike action after previous limited actions failed.

The ruling demanded the office of General Accounting should pay government funding of the judicial system to the National Judicial Council, instead of which it is held by the Executive, which has been ruled unconstitutional.

The president of the Judiciary Staff Union of Nigeria said that until the federal and state governments comply with the ruling the courts will remain under lock and key.



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